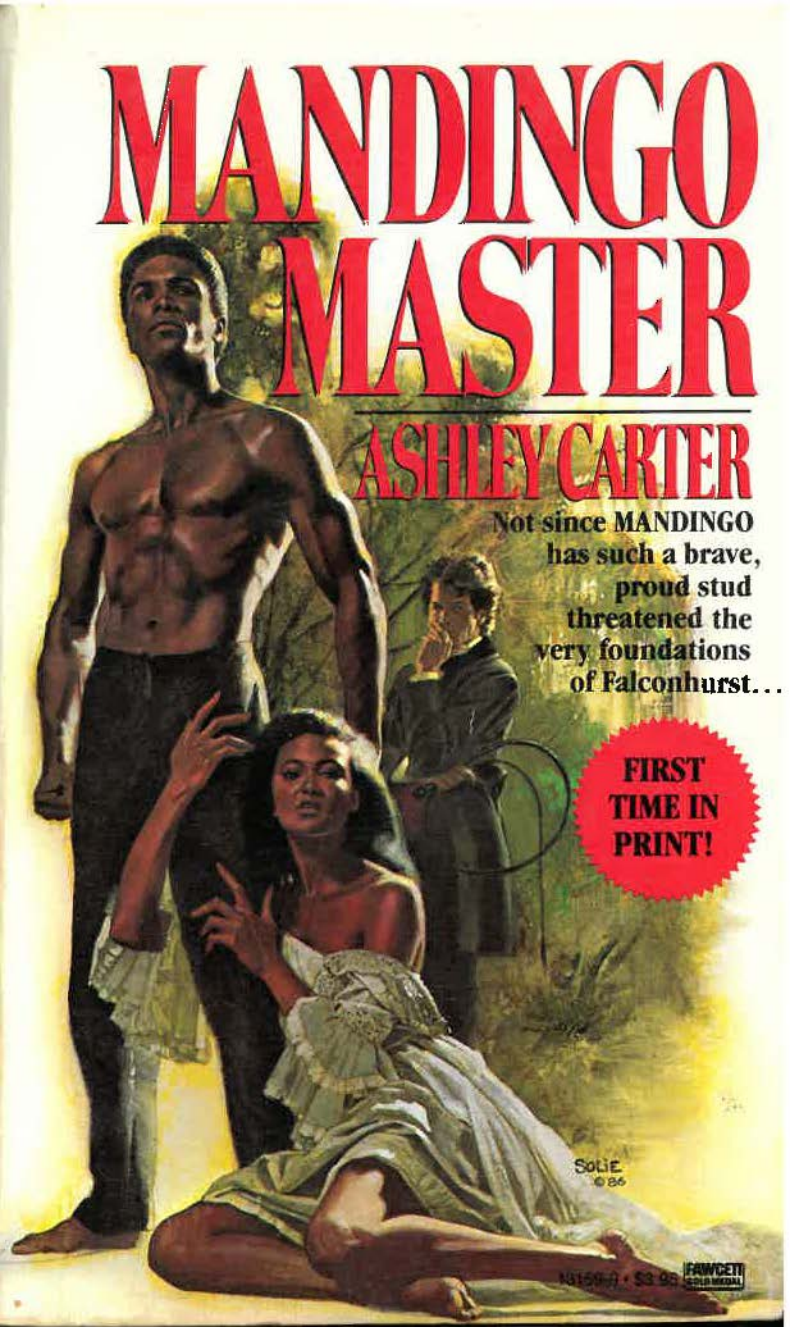
MANDINGO MASTER

ASHLEY CARTER

Not since MANDINGO has such a brave, proud stud threatened the very foundations of Falconhurst...

FIRST TIME IN PRINT!



14159-0 • $3.95 FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL

WHO IS THE MASTER? WHO IS THE SLAVE?

Falconhurst—the south's greatest slave-breeding plantation—has known great heights of glory and grueling hard times. But a new adventure begins when Master Hammond returns from Africa with Obed—a Mandingo!

Ham desperately needs Obed's rippling muscles, seething virility, and pure Mandingo blood to spawn a new generation of what Falconhurst is famous for: superior-quality black flesh.

There's only one problem. Obed is fierce, dignified, and spirited. He refuses to be anybody's slave!

In a battle of wills as old as humanity itself, cruel white slave-breeder and proud black slave will test the limits of each other's determination. And the future of Falconhurst hangs in the balance....

MANDINGO MASTER

In the sizzling Falconhurst tradition, a gripping and shocking saga.

ISBN 0-449-13159-9

Cover printed in USA

When the whips stopped, Obed's battered body lay absolutely unmoving. Ham came and stood over him and raised his voice. "You heah me, Obed? Tell me. Who is yo' masta?"

Obed opened his eyes slowly. For some moments the white man and the two blacks, the tack room gear and the slash of sunlight spun and wheeled about his head. He stared up at that hated white face, almost insane with fiery pain.

Then he spat and spoke imperiously between his teeth. "I am a king," he said.

MANDINGO MASTER

Ashley Carter

FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL • NEW YORK

A Fawcett Gold Medal Book
Published by Ballantine Books
Copyright © 1986 by Harry Whittington

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

This novel is based on themes, settings, characters, atmosphere and situations created by Kyle Onstott and Lance Horner in Mandingo and the Falconhurst novels, and has been prepared for publication through the special and exclusive arrangements of the representatives of Kendric L. (Lance) Horner Estate and Kyle Onstott Estate.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 86-91291

ISBN 0-449-13159-9

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition: January 1987

With gratitude and affection, for my son
Howard,
who discovered the Mandingan king,
and for Monsieur
Cheikh Sakho,
mon ami de Reims and Senegal,
who knew the story of the mansa

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As Kyle Onstott wrote in 1957 in his novel *Mandingo,* the Mandingo people were a Hamitic tribe of the western Sudan—perhaps of Arab or Berber origin. They were proud, handsome, strong, robust. Purebred Mandingans were of a rich copper color, with Moorish features.

The Mandingan kingdom, established about A.D. 1200, had its capital at Timbuktu. These people commanded a premium in the slave market because of their strength, vigor, beauty, delicacy, and intelligence.

Only a few Mandingoes were brought to the mainland of North America.

The Mandingan king of this novel was one of these tragic beings. He was called by his subjects "mansa," the Mandingan word for "supreme ruler." He was regal in every sense of the word.

Ironically, "mansa" is pronounced "massa," the slave word for the southern plantation owner.

A.C.

Part One:

THE NIGHTMARE

I

The fever, the madness, the obsession, whatever it was, began with Mede's voice calling from the grave. . . .

The first time he heard Mede's anguished cry was almost a week after the Mandingo's violent death. He sat bolt upright in the down-soft mattress of his rope-sprung bed, certain he had screamed aloud in his sleep.

"Massa?" Mede's tormented whisper keened from the malignant shadows. "Lawsy, Massa . . . you done kilt me. . . ."

Holding his breath, throat aching, heart fluttering frantically like a wild bird battering against an alien cage, Ham stared about in the after-midnight darkness. Pit-spawned shadows boiled from the corners, from the slightly opened chiffonier door, from the ceiling. Mists coursed in, chill and damp, through open windows.

"Massa? . . . Massa, honey." Mede's eerie whisper persisted from nowhere.

Ham clapped his hand over his mouth to keep from crying out. Until this moment he'd named his distemper nightmare, the sounds only torn wisps from a bad dream. *But he wasn't dreaming now, was he?*

God, no. He'd never been more fully awake, nor as paralyzed with unreasoning dread. Why should he be daunted? He'd never been afraid of Mede, or of any other living black; why should he be terrified of the dead? He felt no sorrow at Mede's savage passing. He tolled no bells. If ever a black animal deserved to die agonizingly, the Mandingo had. Yet, chilled marbles of sweat oozed from his armpits down along

his ribs. It wasn't Mede he feared, or ghostly apparition. It was that damned disembodied voice, or some trick of nightwind putting voices into the darkness to unman him.

He waited. There were only ordinary nocturnal, wind-tipped silences. He peered around cautiously, hardly daring to move his head lest he irritate the spirits of evil surrounding him.

He was alone in his bedchamber except for his mustee bedwench, sprawled facedown, blanket awry, on the floorpad where he'd shoved her when he'd finished pestering with her for a while after he'd first retired. Strange too. Ellen was a fresh concubine, newly taken into his bed, but, for the last week, her wildest ministrations barely reached or roused him. Every night he was glad to escape her and her clinging arms and liquid femininity, ready to devour him. Nothing pleased or enchanted him anymore.

Ham stared down at Ellen for a long moment without passion but with grateful realization that she was there, even if she were only a beast that could talk, like all niggers were. It was better than lying alone in this darkness with his disturbing dream.

A beautiful, caramel-skinned girl of sixteen, Ellen slept, in linsey nightgown, arms outflung on both sides. Her short crisp black hair threaded across the cotton-stuffed pillow which he permitted her because she was his favorite, his cosset.

He felt an abrupt flaring of hatred for Ellen that she could sleep so soundly, insensitive to the terror that stalked him. He was unable to credit that even a black girl, ovine-stupid, could sleep with that eerie voice calling from the mists and shadows.

Ham exhaled heavily. He could have kept the black girl in his bed after he was shed of her earlier, but he hadn't wanted to. It wasn't being alone that bothered him; hell, he preferred it. Get a nigger wench stirred up and sweating and that musky smell could be stifling in a closed room.

Still, watching her sagged like a rag doll in exhaustion, he wished to God she were lost in something less than the sleep of the dead, so that she could have heard Mede's voice too. *If it were Mede's voice.* The longer he was awake, the clearer

his mind became, mists of terror dissipating, the less convinced he was that the dead slave's call was anything more than the stuff of nightmare.

He'd be all right now. He'd grown accustomed since birth to sleeping alone, to strange silences of the sleep-stunned old mansion, unexplained noises and skitterings in the walls, aging wood straining at its pegs; leaves, limbs, and ivy, breeze-brushed against windowpanes dark with night, fitfully illumined by faint red reflections of the hearth's dying fire.

"A bad dream," he said aloud. "A bad dream. That's all it was."

Ellen stirred, writhing obediently under the muted sound of his voice, but not waking. He swung his legs over the side of the thick mattress and sat staring at the high-yeller bedwench. He considered waking her, but he was too tired to pester with her again tonight, and sometimes black dams hungered and importuned unreasonably, once roused. He didn't want to talk to her. He had nothing to say to her unless she was pleasuring him and he seldom spoke at such critical moments. Maybe sometimes he cried out in sweet anguish, but that was all. He wanted the warmth of human companionship. A nigger was hardly fit company, little better than a lapdog.

No. He was finally getting himself under control. He no longer smelled that sour-sweet stench of burning flesh—Mede's stewing body—a sickening odor that had pervaded the house and grounds for days even after the Mandingo was dead and buried.

"The memory," he muttered aloud. "That's all. Jes' the unsettlin' memory. Made me kindly sick at my stomach."

It would pass in a day or so. Hell, it had to. Mede was not the first Falconhurst slave he had punished, nor would he be the last. Meting out a punishment to match black crime was part of his responsibility. He had never felt the least compunction when time came to punish, brand, castrate, whip, or even kill one of his black herd. The African beasts belonged to him. They could be bought or sold, flogged or flayed, even slain, with impunity. It was right bestowed divinely, at birth. It was absolute. It was good.

Why then was he overcome with this sudden new sense of terror?

It was just that the matter of Mede, and the manner of his death in that huge log-fired vat in the barnyard were unusual, unusual as hell. As were the heartbreaking circumstances of betrayal and miscegenation and faithlessness surrounding the execution. He'd go back to sleep in a moment. He had to get some sleep.

But Ham did not move. He stayed slouching, roundshouldered, on the edge of the bed, aware of poisonous mists at the windows, the creeping nightshades of the awesome dark. Hell, he'd go bats if he didn't get some sleep. He assured himself again he felt no sense of guilt at having slain Mede. It was something forced upon him. He had killed the Mandingo with a clear conscience. He would do it again, a hundred times if he had to. As heir of the Hammond and Maxwell names, Ham represented the highest strata of southern elite. He had been born a Maxwell, his mother a Hammond, into southern aristocracy. And, God knew, a true southern gentleman must take all steps, no matter how personally abhorrent, no matter how heinous, to expunge any blot or stain on his honor. This he had done. This was all he had done. Nothing was changed at Falconhurst—except that Mede was dead almost a week now—and he himself had suffered a bad dream, a nightmare.

Ham sighed expansively and nodded his head. He straightened and yawned with almost delicious painfulness. He would put the whole ugly matter out of his head and get some sleep before he went as daft as a guinea hen.

He turned, patting up his pillow and yawning. Then, sick, he heard the whispered voice again, plaintive, persistent, pleading. "Oh, Massa! Massa! You done kilt your own Mede what loves you. . . . Mede ain't wronged you none, Massa. . . . What fo' you all kilt Mede, Massa? What fo' you done kilt me?"

Ham sat up, trembling. He would have screamed as he had in childhood, but terrified, he was afraid to make a sound. He clapped his hand over his mouth to keep from crying out.

He was convinced now. Something—unearthly—waited in the darkness for him to dare to speak or move. But Ham was too smart for that. He sat rigid, sleepless. He felt tautness in his throat as if he were choking for no good reason. Spasms

contracted the muscles of his intestines and constricted the walls of his colon, closing these tracts like a clenched fist, backing the gas into the pit of his stomach so the hot bile and acid seared his belly walls like white-hot poker tips.

He sat unmoving until just before daybreak. Barely conscious by then, he sagged across the mattress, plunging, stunned, into restless sleep. . . .

II

The sun, mid-morning high and hot, wakened Ham. He lay a moment, shuddering. He felt better, rested, though still badly shaken. Nothing like this had ever happened to him. He sat up and gazed abstractedly around his bedroom. He'd known this old house since birth, but today it seemed somehow disturbingly different, strangely alien.

Ham shook his head. Surrendering to panic made even less sense than the madness of last night's nightmare. He'd been born in an upstairs bedroom of this aged, hand-hewn, frame plantation manse, yet this morning it appeared altered, even fearful, a place of silent dread by day, an arena of terror by night.

He tried to shut these ideas from his mind. This was his home. The big, weathered old house, built almost forty-five years earlier, stood on a slight eminence between the Benson trace and the estate outbuildings, barns, corrals, hog pens, slave quarters, smithy and craft cribs. Trees proliferated, elm, magnolia—or white cucumber as natives called it—from box elders along the banks of the raging Tombigbee, marking Falconhurst's far boundaries, through hickory hammocks, hawthorne groves, flowering acres of dogwood, to live oaks and chinaberries, nearer the house.

Compared with the magnificent mansions of the gentry, or even the Hammond country place from which Warren Maxwell had brought Ham's mother as his bride, Falconhurst was less than elegant. Far less. No long, manicured avenue of matching shrubs led from main road to manse. The main house stood just above the roadway. A rutted lane wound

between a shabby miscellany of maples, tupelos, chestnuts, and long-leaf pines to the front entrance. A wide, shadowed veranda, with cedar-slab steps, extended along the facade of the structure. Perhaps, in the beginning, white paint had coated the sand- and wind-whipped pinewood, but no trace or tinge of color persisted now except perhaps in memories as aged as Warren Maxwell's.

Ham sighed. This ancient three-storied abode, weathered clapboard, slanted roof of warped shakes, was unchanged in his own memory since his earliest awareness. The only touch of beauty were two stained-glass dormer windows set high in the roofing. This shed pitched straight down as covering for the open gallery, supported by rough rounds of peeled cypress. Two doors opened off this elongated veranda, which was furnished with cane-bottomed rocking chairs and with rain-barrel sentinels at every downspout. The farmhouse slouched, decaying, toughening, its wood petrifying with age. Falconhurst was soundly built, but drab, cheerless, dark.

Still, this great estate, with its thousands of acres and hundreds of fancy-quality slaves, was all his. He had every reason for feeling triumphant and untouched by despair or dread. He possessed every asset that established a wellborn man as master of the world around him, white and black. He reigned, along with his ailing father, over this stud farm, ever-expanding affluence, money in banks at New Orleans as well as crammed into iron cookpots buried around the grounds. For these times he held every fortune, every advantage, every resource. He was endowed with power of life and death over his blacks who were to him beasts, blessed with power of speech but not the capability to think, or reason, or to feel pain and emotion as white people did, of course. They were above the primates, but not much.

He swung out of bed, daring himself to find this familiar farm, or himself, changed since yesterday.

He limped across the room and stared at himself in the time-frosted mirror. Name of God, had he gone mad last night, frightened as a mewling child, weak as a woman, as unreasoning as a darky?

He peered at his reflection. He looked as he always had, standing slightly askew because of twisted cartilages in his

knee and the stiff leg he'd suffered after a gelded pony threw him when he was six years old. He exhaled. Sometimes he felt that his disfigurement troubled his father more than it did him. He'd grown accustomed to it. But Warren still hated any gelding, refused to emasculate even the stinkingest goat, or malodorous ram, or dangerous rampant black, in his herds.

Ham squinted, searching for any sign of change in his mein. Coffee-dark skin made his pale blue eyes seem even more faded and flat and, this morning, oddly empty. Blond chin whiskers crept in close-cropped tufts down his sun-leathered cheeks. The back of his neck was seared a fiery red by Alabama suns. Most young gentlemen of his age and station considered a red neck an unworthy stigma of manual labor. Ham took perverse pride in this distinguishing garnish. He was a man doing a man's job, not some namby-pamby drowning in the trivia of wasted afternoons on gardenia-scented verandas.

In his earliest twenties, medium tall, Ham saw himself as well-adjusted, well-built, well-placed in southern society, tempered and weathered by honest toil and hard living.

He dressed slowly, not bothering to wash his crotch or armpits at the china-enameled commode because that damned Mem had neglected to bring hot water again this morning. The worthless black bastard.

The clothing Ham donned, from hand-tooled boots bought in New Orleans to drill work pants and a faded denim shirt sewn on this farm, were kept spotlessly clean by what Ham condescendingly called "nigger grease."

Dressed, he checked himself once more in the mirror. Physically, he was a Maxwell more than a Hammond—with his father's ruddy face and fair eyes, sandy brows, long trunk, and short legs. Inside, where he was stubbornly arrogant and supremely secure in his position, he favored his mother's people. He was of the gentry. But madness? Insanity? Lunacy? He shook his head vigorously. No trace. He found no change in that reflected physiognomy.

He knew who he was and accepted his superiority as he adjusted to a gimpy gait. His sense of worth, self-confidence, of superior identity, came from his family names—Hammond and Maxwell—and from this family estate. He'd been born

into wealth and pride of total security. Uncounted sections of land, cultivated and raw; increasing herds of blacks, multiplying like rabbits. Quality animals of potency and puissance and sleekness unknown in any other brand. Falconhurst Plantation bred highest-standard black flesh to supply the overwhelming need for prize animals for house, field, and factory labor. In 1805 Britain had outlawed slavery and the transportation of slaves on the seas, and in 1819, the United States had followed suit; the supply of slaves was stunted, but the demand swelled. And the Maxwells grew steadily more affluent as slave prices soared, rising almost by the hour.

Even in poor markets, Falconhurst was invulnerable to loss. There existed that decided and discernible difference in the quality of Falconhurst crops of slaves. They were bred to be choice brands. While inferior classes of black animals were sold to rundown farms, where they might be ill-fed and worked to death in a few years, Falconhurst fancies escaped such fate. They were displayed and pampered.

Squires of splendid plantations bartered frantically for Falconhurst blacks as a distinguishing mark of their own wealth and discrimination. Falconhurst slaves were the preferred animals and known to buyers at auction venues from Charleston to New Orleans to Natchez. Falconhurst fancies represented a sizable investment even for the most affluent planter and so were carefully tended, petted, and curried as any other prized animal might be. These extraordinary specimens became the conversation pieces of the greatest plantations, along with thoroughbred Tennessee walking horses, Morgans, Arabian steeds, or the finest crossbreeds of cattle, or any other rare and fashionable collectible.

To the Maxwells, Ham as to his father, their slaves were cattle, pure-blooded animals, mated, reared, sleeked, and conditioned for sale and proudest display. Father and son hooted at abolitionist propaganda about abused Negroes. It made no sense to starve, maltreat, abuse, or neglect valuable beasts, already susceptible to disease, epidemic, and plague. Such animals were petted, primed, oiled, and prepared for the day when they would stand proudly and unselfconsciously naked on some barracoon stage to excite and titillate and inspire awed bidders.

And Ham saw himself as principal in this best of all of God's creations. He accepted that this position was ordained, as the world around him was created and maintained for his service and profit and pleasure. From birth he'd been trained in compassionate, firm, unremitting despotism. He knew nothing else but the authority of the master and the submission of the slave. He accepted all this as the normal, natural way of God's world. He never questioned. He never permitted himself to be questioned.

Why then was he suddenly unnerved?

Hammond found his father sitting alone, already sodden with toddies at nine o'clock in the morning. Ham winced, feeling the flaring of pity. Since the death of Ham's wife and the slaying of the Mandingo Mede, the elder Maxwell had drunk even more heavily than was customary against the onslaughts of time and pain. Blanche had been an especial pet of the father, even after he realized serpents stirred in his son's marriage bed. Still, Maxwell set a lot of store by Blanche. She drank toddies and laughed with him and took his mind off his rheumatism in the long afternoons. He came to love his cousin's daughter deeply. He was satisfied to have Blanche as his son's wife, as mistress of Falconhurst. Even when she gave birth to poor little Sophie, cross-eyed and ugly as a scrawny little weed, he never wavered in his affection for her. He had not wanted to believe the Negro-peddled scandal against Blanche; he called the accusations lies until he could no longer doubt; then his heart seemed to break and he aged ten years in ten days.

Ham shook his head. It was not Blanche's loss, her perfidy, or her death, or even the death of Maxwell's infant grandson that lingeringly distressed the aging man. Ham's heartbreak was his father's agony. The elder Maxwell allayed his anxieties over his son's despair by drinking more toddies, heavily laced with whiskey, until he staggered drunk, from daybreak to dusk. Toddies were an anodyne for the wrenching sorrow he watched Ham silently endure. Only time could cure Ham's loss, the outrageous mockery of his masculine pride. Maxwell wondered where he himself might find surcease. Days had passed between father and son since the Mandingo's

death by stewing, days without words exchanged between Ham and Warren Maxwell. Even the work routine, as lax as it was, went to hell. Ham was too despondent even to ride his mule through the rows of cotton to oversee labor, or assess any prospect of yield. Unchopped, the neglected cotton grew wild, flourished, blossomed, and dried unnoticed on stalks. Unchecked, weeds multiplied and nothing was done to deter the decay.

Ham limped around the large dining table to kiss his father before taking his own thick-backed chair at Maxwell's right hand. Ham leaned over the aging man and pressed his lips upon his parent's mouth with unwonted ferocity, as if he desperately needed such reassurances as he had not sought since earliest childhood.

He shuddered. His father seemed older, weaker, afflicted by age and the assault of rheumatism, by the swelling of his joints. His father seemed changed, somehow helpless when he needed him most, just as this familiar room was no longer warm and secure. The high ceilings and dark paneled walls looked faintly sinister, even by daylight. Log fires blazed all day and half the night in the downstairs fieldstone fireplaces, and the hearth fire crackled here in the dining room; yet the chill persisted.

Warren Maxwell, giddy with his hot toddies, drowsy though he'd been out of bed less than an hour, sagged like a sleepy child at the table's head. Fireglow and candlelight flared wanly against the chill and the shadows. The odor of freshly fried ham, baked biscuits, eggs, and red-eye gravy assaulted Ham's nostrils, and he shuddered with nausea. He was afraid that if he ate, he would become violently sick, vomiting for hours, and then there would be the retching after there was no bile left to disgorge, the trying to puke and wishing to die.

Warren Maxwell, surprised but almost sensually delighted by his son's excess of filial devotion, smiled and nodded, patting Ham's cheek with pain-stiffened fingers. He waited for his son to inquire about his health, which had deteriorated overnight and which he needed to expound upon to someone; it was more than he could endure alone. His joints racked; he lifted one hand only with the other; he hated even to glance down at those swollen knuckles. Yet, despite the agony and

the toddy-induced somnolence, he had no real consideration for anything except his son's distress. Ham was his life. His own body was like a deformed caricature of his son's firm young form, the same short legs, elongated trunk, sandy brows, and sun-braised features. But in his soul he felt he was one with his only offspring. Hammond's afflictions were his woes, Hammond's hurts, his pain.

Troubled, Warren watched Ham sit unmoving at his place, not bothering to serve himself any of the hot vittles steaming in dishes before him. He was afraid his son was not going to be able to eat again this morning and, sensing the anguish of his boy, he sat silently, sorrowed, but he did not try to talk with Ham simply for the sake of conversation and, though he believed the youth needed guidance as never before, he did not offer any counsel.

"Take out and eat, son," he said in a gentle voice.

Ham seemed not to hear him, but Maxwell was not offended. The boy was in hell. That it was a purgatory partly of his own making did not lessen its fury or intensity. Ham had poisoned Blanche. Still, looking back, he found no other course the betrayed husband might have taken. The boy had done what he had to do. He regretted that Ham had destroyed the Mandingo Mede because there never had lived a finer physical specimen of manhood west of Senegal and the Sudan. And smart! Mede was almost like a human, he was so brilliant. And most of all, Mede had impregnated the black dams, and their foals dropped beautiful and lusty indeed. But the father was resigned even to this loss. It was Ham's decision, and he no longer gainsaid the boy on any matter of managing Falconhurst.

"Had a bothersome dream las' night, Pa." Hammond spoke after a long, abstracted silence. Only noises from the kitchen intruded, but the Maxwells had long since tuned out such repeated disturbances.

Maxwell massaged one twisted hand with the other, thinking that with even this slight heat of friction the pain subsided slightly, but it never entirely left his joints. But, like the noises from the kitchen, he had become inured to its agonizing presence. He could live with it, because there was not another damned thing he could do with it, though he tried

every remedy known to alleviate pain in man or beast. He nodded. "Yes. I was afraid you did."

"Why?" Ham leaned forward, reaching toward his father in a beseeching way. "Did you hear—?"

"Heah?" Warren shook his head negatively. "Didn't heah nothin', sonny. 'Twas just that you do look like an' you been dragged through a knothole and hung up wet."

"I feel like it. Had me a guyacutus dream las' night. Only 'twasn't like no other dream I ever had, or ever heard of, neither. I could *hear* Mede, Pa. Clear as I hear you now. Oncet or twicet, I'd of swore I *seen* him." He shivered and pressed his eyes closed. "Only not like he was—alive—but with the flesh b'iled from his bones an' hangin' in clabberous strips. . . . an' still I knowed it was him. Come to torment me . . . That bastard Mandingo . . . Wouldn't let me live in peace. Now comes back to haunt me."

"You jest had too much on you lately."

"No, Pa. I seen him. I swear I did. I heard him calling to me. The bastard. A-swearin' his innocence and keenin' at me why did I kill him."

"You jus' in a most lamentable time, boy." Warren shook his head from side to side. "You done what you plain had to do. Cain't nobody gainsay that. But the worst of it was, son, you was too young—too young to bear that horror and agony of what befell you so sudden like, a plague of evil. . . . You had to tote this whole plantation on your shoulders. And you still just a boy."

"You know I never minded workin', Pa."

"Ain't what I'm sayin', son. I'm sayin' with all that responsibility, and I too ailin' to share with you, then you had heaped on that that ugliness of yore poor wife bearin' you a nigger chile. . . . Thank Gawd, Blanche's mother was here to knock the monster in the head afore anybody saw it—'ceptin' the yarb woman who midwifed her."

"And Doc Redfield. He seen it too. An' all the niggers on the place knowed Mede was raping my wife. Raping her right here in my house. An' her a-sendin' out for him to come and rape her—an' her a-pesterin' with Lucretia Borgia's randy twins when Mede didn't come a-rapin'."

"All that. All that," the father said. "All that and more."

Ham shuddered visibly. All that and more. Aye, God, all that and more. It had started when he brought Cousin Blanche from Crowfoot Plantation to Falconhurst as his bride, even when intercourse with a white lady sickened and repulsed him as much as it was affirmed to disgust and repel the genteel ladies themselves. It had started there, but it would never end. He had slain the treacherous wife and that raping Mandingo buck, but Mede refused to die, refused to stay dead. Every time he drifted into sleep, Mede came shambling back to him, horrible, stewed flesh peeling from skull and skeleton, almost gellid. He had tried to kill Mede—he had killed him!—and God knew no raping nigger ever deserved death more. But Mede would not let him free; he came back, crying, pleading, calling, reaching toward him in the darkness.

Maybe his father was right. He prayed God he was. He had been under unbearable nervous strain for weeks, ever since he'd learned the truth about his wife, her Negroid offspring, and the Negro who raped her, again and again, at her invitation. But, damn it, Mede was dead. Mede couldn't return from hell, where he himself had sent the Mandingo bastard, boiling the skin from his bones to prepare him for his eternity in the pits of hell. He recalled, willingly or not, the way he and Mede's mother, Lucy, had spread the soup of Mede's body in the graveyard, buckets of the greasy broth poured atop the bier of Blanche and her black git. But why wouldn't Mede stay dead? Why did he return, almost whole, though less than human, more slabs of mucus than solid flesh?

He jerked his head up. "Pa. Is there insanity in our family?"

Warren was wrenched upward from complacent melancholy. "Insanity? In the Maxwell family? My God, sonny. My God. My God. How come you ask such a terrible thing?"

"In Mama's family then? Among the Hammonds? I know. I heard you say often that them Hammonds were pretty weak quality, like their blood done gone to whey."

"No. No. No." The father waved his arm, crimson face bleak. "They was weak strain, maybe, played out compared to the robust Maxwells, but that was all. Strong. Good people . . . Still . . . They was one . . . Your maw's uncle Robby. Uncle Robby lived alone in a hothouse, alone with his plants. He wouldn't have anything to do with people—

except little girls. They had to watch him like a hawk when they was little girls around."

Ham exhaled heavily. "Then they is a strain of mental weakness in our blood."

"Don't you even say such a thing out loud . . . Hammond blood only part of you, anyhow. Whey maybe. Strong Maxwell blood built you. Look at you. Look at them shoulders. Them sinews. Them thighs like the cedars of Lebanon."

Ham sat rigidly, staring at his plate, afraid if he took a bite of food, he would start to vomit and would never stop vomiting as long as he lived.

III

Mem furtively chug-a-lugged three hasty but hard pulls on the quart mason jar of Master Warren's whiskey in the pantry off the kitchen. He gasped for breath, panting and shuddering, then grinned faintly, his dark face beaming. He took up a leek and shoved it into his mouth, bulb, stalk and all. Then he cupped his hand before his mouth and puffed, sniffing as quickly as possible, searching for telltale signs of liquor on his breath. He had to camouflage his breathing or Master Warren would order him flayed again. Master Warren disliked the servant's drinking, and he despised even more the filching of white man's moonshine. He had told Mem this a thousand times; he would go on telling him and Mem would go on stealing quick pick-me-ups or he'd never gird up courage enough to face the master. From long experience Mem had learned to anticipate the worst. Anything else was folly. Finally, he was able, if not yet ready, to face his white masters for the day.

He left the pantry. He heard Miz Lucretia Borgia ordering him to serve fresh coffee. "Where you goin' without the coffeepot, lame brain?" she wanted to know.

He didn't look at her, or answer her. He took up the hot earthenware pot and trudged across the large room toward the closed dining room door.

Agamemnon was his full appelation, though no one ever called him anything but Mem. He wore the splendid title Agamemnon because Master Warren's father, educated at the University of Virginia, gathered ironic delight in naming his stupid black slaves for the highest-placed Olympians.

Each morning began like this for Mem. He approached the dining room portal reluctantly, lagging as if on his way to the gibbet. The hell of it was, he never knew until lighting struck what the storm was, or where it was coming from. He sweated, never knowing what task or chore he'd neglected or botched the night before, what order he'd forgotten, or failed to follow, what hearth had grown cold. Seemed to him they were after him all the time, like white devils—but then, what other color could a devil be but white?

"Gonna ride me alla time. Like a swayback mule. Oughta git a saddle," he muttered.

His heart sank at the scene before him. Both father and son, surprised at the energy of his entrance, sat upright and jerked their heads around. The fire was burning low in the fireplace. The toddy glass beside Master Warren's plate was empty. Stunned at the inquisition ahead, Mem simply stopped, shoulders sagging, beside the table.

Master Hammond, at least ten years younger than Mem, glared. "What'd you say, boy?"

Though Hammond's voice rasped and quivered with outrage, part of it was old habit. One yelled at Mem just to get his attention, and kept yelling to hold it. Too, Ham welcomed the sight of the recalcitrant servant. His presence, for the moment anyhow, took the master's mind off the nightmare and the tragedy. Venting his spleen on the Negro almost restored him, even if only temporarily.

When Mem didn't answer at once, but appeared to be drowsing on his feet just inside the kitchen door, Ham bellowed at him. "Damn you, Mem. I'm talking to you."

Mem roused himself and shuffled a couple of steps nearer the table. "Yas suh, Massa. You a-callin'?"

"Course I'm a-callin'. I'm a-yelling at the top of my lungs or you don't pay no nevermind. I want to know what you said when you came in here."

Mem trembled visibly. He had forgotten it, whatever it was, and he could not retrieve it in his new terror. "Didn't say nawthin', Massa Ham, honey, suh." Mem stood helplessly, forgetting the heavy, steaming earthenware vessel in his hand.

Maxwell shook his head, laughing in disgust. "Ain't you forgettin' somethin' there, Mem?"

"Naw suh. Jes' coffee."

"Jes' coffe fo' what, you ignorant black bastid? Coffee for what?"

Mem looked ready to cry. "Jes' coffee, Massa."

"Well, pour it, god damn it. Pour it, you slothful varmint. You slothful, Memnon. Most slothful house nigger I ever seen."

"Ought to sell you down the river," Hammond threatened.

Mem's eyes welled with tears, but mostly because he'd learned tears pleased and mollified the white people as nothing else did. "Don't sell ole Mem away from Falconhurst, Master," he pleaded, though he really did not care. It seemed to him an exciting prospect to find what lay beyond the next bend of the Tombigbee, over the farthest hill on his horizon. Couldn't be any worse, could it? Hell was hell, wasn't it? Here a little hell, there a little hell. And every little hell run by little white devils. One place seemed pretty much like another to Mem.

"What the hell you woolgathering about now? Pour the coffee, Memnon."

This was a new voice, and though it came from the colossal Lucretia Borgia, Mem trembled as he never did when either of his white masters reproached him. He was scared shitless of Miz Lucretia Borgia. Any sane nigger would be.

She had entered the dining room from the steamy kitchen on soft slippers that could glide quieter than cat's paws. She had quieted down her noisy scullery crew and hurried out to stand, alert and poised, as she did at every meal, like a sentinel at Master Warren's high-backed chair, arms folded under her spotless cotton apron.

Miz Lucretia had quit the kitchen hurriedly when she heard Master Ham bellowing at Memnon. She was as curious as a cat, overflowing with energy and interest in everything, delighted with a life that had been far less than kind to her. She had no time to be morose. She found traces of good in everything, or if she couldn't, she altered the circumstances until they pleased her. She laughed easily, she wept copiously, she lived every second to the fullest.

She was a statuesque girl, over five feet ten inches tall, and imposing in every way. Her hugeness was not corpulent; she was Junoesque, regal. Her pedigree papers designated her octoroon, but she was really Tierceron—though she'd never heard the word and likely never would. Her blood was three-eighths black and five-eighths white, which was immaterial, because in every southern state of her era, one drop of Negro blood stamped a being forever black, less than human. Her color was a warm tobacco brown, and her features were incredibly lovely, distinctly Negroid, but softened, chiseled. Maxwell figured Miz Lucretia was probably a mixture of Fan and Jaloff, with Sudanese blood splashed in to account for her height and commanding girth. The rough butternut-brown osnaburg dress she wore was freshly washed, ironed, and strained across the large, high-standing, melon-shaped breasts. Her white apron was forever clean and stiffly starched. Her most attention-grabbing apparel was the length of red calico bound turbanlike around her head, and the gold earrings that sparkled in her earlobes. Everything about Miz Lucretia Borgia testified to the special position she had etched for herself in this household.

"That Memnon, he don't step fast enough for snail-catchin'." She insinuated herself between the butler and the table, taking the hot vessel from him and filling the cups beside the plates. Mem stood helplessly, watching her. "He let my dear massas run out'n coffee. Triflin', that's what. More trouble with Mem than I has with any other niggers on this place."

At any other time, Lucretia would have found instant agreement and support from her beloved young Masta Ham. But this morning he was soured with bile, filled with hatred. His voice rasped at her. "What else is you, Lucretia Borgia, but a black, black nigger wench too big for her britches?"

"Tha's what I is, Young Massa. Tha's what I is, all right," she agreed good-naturedly. Her black eyes sparkled. Her mouth widened in a grin, displaying powerful milk-white teeth. She stood smiling with devotion at her beloved master, buxom and broad-beamed, swaying from side to side with her own kind of unruffled, unflappable majesty. She remained cheerful, laughing at herself and the world, no matter the treatment she received.

"You think you runs this heah place, don't you, Lucretia Borgia?" Ham demanded, peering at her, face dark and scowling.

Lucretia Borgia dropped her hands to her hips. "Oh, ain't never even thought such a thought, Massa Honey . . . even if'n I could think—like white folks, I wouldn't think nothin' like that. Guess I jus' kindly got in the habit here lately, Massa Hammond suh. All the troubles and the hurt and the agony. I knows you need all the lovin' and support you kin git, an' unlikely as I is, that's what I tries to do. But ain't thinkin' I run this here Falconhurst. No suh! Ain't bossin' nobody. Doin' what I tole."

"See that you do. Jes' 'cause I tetch old Mem up with the blacksnake, don't git the uppity idea you too good to be whupped, naked and hard. Won't have no uppity niggers on Falconhurst, Lucretia Borgia. I tole and I done tole you."

"Uppity," Mem said under his breath.

But he didn't speak softly enough. Ham heard him. He shoved back in his chair and turned on the butler, raging. "Jes' who you callin' uppity, boy?"

"Nobody, Massa. Nobody. Jes' saying the word. Tryin' to remember that word, Massa, so I don't do it, knowin' in my heart how you hate it, how you do hate and despise a uppity nigger."

"Whoa there." Hammond reached out and grabbed the front of Mem's white-laced shirt, pulling him close. The sour stench of corn whiskey was all too apparent on the slave's breath. "You drunk, goddamn you, Mem. You drunk and talkin' 'bout Miz Lucretia Borgia 'cause you think to worm your way in my good graces. Thinkin' I forgits yo' lapses and failin's. You a disgrace to Falconhurst, you black ape. I tellin' you as I done tole you, I don't nevah want to hear you sayin' disrespectful words to white people. An, fo' you, that goes fo' Miz Lucretia Borgia too. But you start blabbin', hopin' to git off light with me." He released Mem with such force that the thin black toppled against the wall. "Mayhap a tetch of dogsnake teach you a lesson to keep your big tater-trap shut less'n a white person speaks first to you. An' as much goes fo' speakin' against Miz Lucretia Borgia too."

Miz Lucretia Borgia shivered with a slight warmth of

pleasure and pride. All was atoned for. Master Ham had raged at her, but this was his apology to her. It was as near as he could ever permit himself to apologizing, and she anticipated no more. She was more than satisfied with what she received; she was gratified and exalted. She had to bite back the smile that pulled at her sculpted red mouth.

Ham sat back down at the table but did not eat or even place food on his plate. He was not through with Mem yet. He glanced at the miserable Negro across his shoulder. "Mem. Stand up straight, boy. I'm talkin' to you. You stand up straight when I talk to you."

"Yas suh, Massa. I standin' mighty straight."

"See that you do. I want to know why you didn't bring my kettle of hot bath water to my room this mawnin'? Ain't you suppose to bring hot water fo' my ablutions every blessed mornin' of the world?"

To the stunned shock of the three of them, Mem burst suddenly into helpless tears. He sagged into himself, arms limp at his sides, crying. He could not stopper his wailing. His body shook, his nose ran, his thick lips quivered and drooled. He would have fallen, but he was too helpless to move.

Ham jumped up. Even the older Maxwell twisted in his chair, his ruddy face pallid.

"What's the matter with you, boy?" Ham said, troubled. "I jes' axed you a simple question. One simple question. Tha's all. Wha's wrong with you?"

"I scairt, Massa."

"What you scairt of? Nobody heah but Pa, Miz Lucretia, and me. We won't hurt you. What you scairt of?"

Mem shook his head, barely able to speak coherently. "Not you. Las' night. I scairt las' night. . . . Too scairt to go up in your room this mawnin', even in daylight."

Flooded with hope, Ham smiled and caught Mem's arms in his hands. "Why? Why you scairt last night, Mem? You heah somethin'? You heah voices las' night?"

Crying, Mem shook his hed. "Naw suh. Didn't heah nothin'."

"Then what the hell's the matter, boy?"

"Hit Miz Ellen, Massa. What Miz Ellen say—"

"What did Miz Ellen say?"

Mem's teeth chattered. He wiped the back of his hand across his leaking nostrils. Angrily, old Warren Maxwell threw him a linen napkin. "Blow your nose in that, boy," Warren ordered.

"You does and I breaks yo' leg," Miz Lucretia Borgia said.

Nobody paid any attention to Lucretia Borgia's violation of protocol. Mem stood helplessly holding the linen napkin, crying, nose running. Ham watched him intently, not blinking. "What did Miz Ellen say?"

"Miz Ellen say . . . early this mawnin' . . . down in the kitchen where she come just 'fore daylight . . . Miz Ellen say Massa Hammond is a-cryin' an' a-whimperin' and a-carryin' on in the night like some ha'nt after him. Miz Ellen say."

"But you didn't hear nothin'. Last night. You didn't hear nothin?"

"Naw suh. Didn't heah a blessed thing. I swear. It just what Miz Ellen say. . . . I scairt to go up in that room."

"But you didn't hear nothing'—in my room. Las' night?"

"Lawsy. If'n I seed airy ole ha'nt, I'd run away from my ownest shadow, Massa. I'd a-run so far and so fast I'd be lost 'fore I cotched my breath. . . . That ole ha'nt have no trouble findin' Memnon, Massa. All that ha'nt have to do is burn the world and sift the ashes."

Ham sighed and sank back into his chair. The brief hope that someone else, even a being as unreliable as Mem, might have seen or heard the Mandingo Mede last night, died hard. He glanced up. "I hide you good, Mem, if you see or heah something' an' you don't tell me. I whup you bloody if you lie about seein' anything at night."

"Don't see nothin', Massa. Don't take my head from under the cover."

"That's the Lawd's truth," Miz Lucretia said in contempt. "That nigger scairt of his own shadow."

"Mem triflin'," Old Warren said. "Maybe he did see somethin'. Maybe a tetch of the buggy whip remind him."

"He all right," Ham said in a dead voice.

"You too upset to deal with him, I could blacksnake him," Warren said.

Ham shook his head. "If it got to be done, hits my job."

"No. Had ought to do more'n I do. Had ought to take some of the load off'n you."

"I all right, Pa. I jes' sick an' tired, tha's all. This heah bad dream. Tha's a sign I kindly under the weather. I be all right."

"Still. Threshin' the niggers. It got to be done. An' it my job when you ill like this."

"He be all right."

"Do Memnon good. Open up his sinuses. Make him spry."

"He need it all right. . . . But not now, Pa. Not now."

"That up to you, son. You makes the decisions round here. An' I abides by 'em. You jes' get your strength back. Take a big heapin' dish of vittles. Pry your ribs apart."

"Don't think I could eat, Pa. Don't think I could hold it down."

He sagged, his hands in his lap. He kept his head lowered so none of them could see the misty glint of tears in his eyes. Tears he hated because they were tears of self-pity. He hated self-pity. He bellowed and raged at the house niggers as if he hated them, but he didn't. He took his hatred out on them because they were at hand and helpless against him, but the hell of it was, he hated nobody except himself. . . .

Ham tried to tend to the lightest chores about the place, but he could not concentrate. As the day waned, he grew restive, sick-bellied with dread. He did not see how he could face the night ahead.

Though there was work he might have accomplished, there was nothing that could occupy his mind. He just didn't give a damn. He thought about riding into Benson, just to get away, just to clear the cobwebs from his head, but the roads were muddy, rutted, and dangerous. He even wondered what might happen if he didn't make it back to Falconhurst before dark.

He shuddered at the prospect of riding that lonely trace after nightfall. He didn't give a damn that he'd done it a thousand times before. These times were strange. He sat by the living room fire and drank toddies with his father, but he found his parent watching him oddly, worried, not saying

anything about this new terror, but rehashing it in his mind, that was for sure.

The sun faltered and darkness edged in across the plowed fields. Ham felt his heart batter in a strange new way, just out of rhythm. Nightfall had become a time of terror in these days immediately after Mede's violent death. That goddamn nigger! Why couldn't he just die and get on to hell the way decent beings did?

Without saying anything, Ham turned his bedchamber into an armed barricade. He laid his old Kentucky flintlock rifle braced against the headboard, loaded, ready. Then he got his 1812-model Kentucky flintlock pistol and placed it within reach on the nightstand. His mouth pulled down in a cold grin. If he had to keep on killing that bastard nigger, so be it. Let him come. He'd send Mede finally to hell if he had to kill him a hundred times.

Anyway, with his guns beside him, he'd sleep better.

He lingered as long as possible in the parlor with his father, but when the old man began to grunt and yawn, there was nothing to do but help him up to bed.

Mem brought a brass kettle filled with boiling water which he poured into the commode in Ham's bedroom. "Wants me to he'p you undress, Massa?" Mem asked. Eyes white-rimmed, he gazed about the room, fascinated and yet terrified.

"No. Get to hell out of here," Ham said. "Miz Ellen can help me with my boots."

"Yas suh." Mem was already on his way across the room, moving spiritedly. He passed Ellen in the doorway. He mumbled a greeting and farewell and hurried away along the cavernous upper corridor.

Ellen came timidly into the room. Her smile was tentative.

Dropping his pants, Ham unbuttoned his denim shirt and tossed it behind him. It would be removed during the night and laundered. In his long johns, Ham sat on the side of the bed and lifted his feet, motioning Ellen to pull the boot from his game leg.

He watched her. He'd had her for a while; he'd gotten her while Blanche was alive and for some unaccountable reason Blanche had hated her. The girl remained shy, even after all these months. He liked that.

When she'd finally twisted and levered the boots from his legs, Ham got up from the bed. With his back to his concubine, he slipped out of his underclothing and tossed them toward the other soiled clothing on the floor.

Face averted, Ellen brought this flannel nighshirt. Without looking at her, he took the gown and slipped it down over his head. Then he went to the commode, poured it half full of steaming hot water. Lathering a washcloth with homemade lye bar soap, still with his back to Ellen, lifted the hem of his gown up above his waist and scrubbed his privates. After rinsing, he toweled off, dropped the curtain of flannel, and turned around.

Ellen had in these moments removed her own osnaburg shift and slipped a short flannel gown down over her own head. She waited while he went around the bedstead, took the top off the thunderchamber, lifted it, and with his back to her, urinated loudly, farting a couple of times. Then, with his genteel decorum intact, he got into his bed and turned back the cover for her.

Ellen went to the ornately shaded bedlamp beside his headboard. She saw the loaded pistol for the first time. She caught her breath, but said nothing. She had learned better than to question her white master. As Lucretia Borgia reminded her repeatedly, "What white folks do ain't none of our nevermind."

When she reached out to trim the wick and blow out the light, Ham caught her hand. "Jes' kindly turn the wick down low. Leave it on slight."

Ellen obeyed, but remained where she was, frowning faintly, troubled. She drew a deep breath and whispered. "You won't be shy, Massa, me lookin' at you nekkid in the lamplight?"

Ham almost growled at her, caught himself at the last moment. Damned nigger had no right questioning her white master. When would the bitch learn? When there was something he wanted her to know, he would tell her. Then he reminded himself he was thankful for her company. He said only, "It all right, Ellen. I keeps my nightshirt on."

She nodded, turned the wick as low as possible so it still flickered with wan life. Then she went around the bed and got in under the cover beside him. When he reached over and covered her orange-sized breasts with one hand and shoved

his probing index finger between her thighs, she shuddered slightly, involuntarily. She wanted him to touch her and make love to her. She looked forward to these few hasty moments all day. They meant something to her. They were all she had. They set her firmly and exaltedly above all the other blacks on Falconhurst Plantation, even the high and mighty Miz Lucretia Borgia. She was the young master's chosen bedwench. Still, she could not, with his wordless, rough assault, help wriggling for a moment like a trout on a hook.

Lying there as he roughly pawed her and thrust her legs farther and farther apart while he drove his extended fingers into her, she remembered the first time she'd been sent to this room. Miz Lucretia Borgia had told her that the master's ordinary bedwench was eight months pregnant, no longer of interest to him. He had chosen Ellen to replace her. Ellen had wondered about Master Hammond's wife, but Miz Lucretia Borgia seemed to read her mind.

"Ain't none of your black business. But the young master cain't no way abide the fish-belly white skin of a nekkid white woman. An' he been taught that white ladies hate and despise pesterin'. He need his good-more pleasurin'. Nothin' else ain't healthful for a virile white man like the young massa. I says amen to that. An' no matter what you thinks up in that room, no matter what he do, or what he tell you to do, you do it, and you do it quick and smilin' like you love it. If you happens to love it, that just icin' on the cake, but you do it whether you love it or not.

"You ack like a lady in his bed. Don't you be forwardly, or pushy. He like a gal to hang back, let him do the pushin'. You forward, he think you a slut what is cock-crazy and he cain't abide that. You do jes' like he say. Everythin' he say—but only when he say. No matter they somethin' you like better than somethin' else, you wait till he ax fo' it, don't you ax him fo' nothin'. When Young Massa finish rapin' you, even if you ain't reach your own break-off, you smile and you thank him . . . if needs be, when he sleepin' you can finish with your own finger . . . but you make Young Massa think he the greatest white man ever crawled a female. You say thankee. Thankee, Massa."

"Thankee, Massa," Ellen had whispered, as if it were a litany to be learned.

She felt her master raise his hips and thrust himself between her wide-parted legs, careful to keep his gown down over his pubic parts. Ellen closed her eyes tightly, set her jaw, and waited.

For the first time since she had been brought to this bed, he did not penetrate her. He sweated profusely and sagged against her, but his staff was far less than colossal. It wavered and buckled against her fevered femininity.

In panic and loathing Ham braced himself upon the heels of his hands on both sides of Ellen. He stared down at her, eyes wild, sweat marbling in his sandy hair and trickling down into his lids, salty and burning, like tears.

"Wha's matter, Massa?" Ellen whispered in tender concern.

"Ain't nothin' the mattah, god damn it," Ham gasped, shaking his head. "Somethin' go wrong, I say what it is. You jes' lay there and keep them legs apart."

"Thankee, Massa."

"Maybe you shake yo' hips some. Move 'em around. Maybe that help me."

"Oh yes, Massa." She flailed her hips upward against his flaccid rod.

He cursed and fell away from her. "Ain't no good," he raged. "Ain't no goddamn good."

She pulled her gown up about her shoulders and tried to press her bare, heated body upon his, but, angered, he thrust her away. "You actin' like a slut," he accused her.

"Oh, Massa, I jes' wants to love you." She began to cry.

"It's all right. It's all right." He sprawled on his back, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling. He thought about thrusting her head down between his legs. This might stir the fever; but he did not. He was afraid even this extreme might fail. And anyway, his mind wasn't on pestering.

"Ain't yo' fault," he whispered in a manifestation of magnanimity he'd not even suspected in himself. He looked at her nakedness, feeling no arousal. Was this the way it was to be from now on? Would he falter like this every time when the moment for manhood arrived? It was a desperate shock to his sense of virility that he had failed at all. As a connoisseur

of fine black female flesh, he knew there was no lovelier little animal than Ellen. Was he losing his manhood, his very grip on power and authority and puissance?

"Young Massa ain't wishin' his pleasurin'?" Her whisper was plaintive.

"It all right," he said. "I kindly off my feed. Kindly sick at my belly. You go on to sleep."

"You be all right, Massa?"

"I be all right, damn it."

The girl smoothed down the gown over the rises, hillocks, planes, and crevices of her splendid young body. She waited, but when he remained still staring at the shadowed ceiling, she moved to get out of his bed and onto the pad she had placed on the floor beside it.

"You don't have to git out of my bed," he said toward the ceiling.

"What? You wants me to sleep with you, Massa?"

"Stay where you are tonight. We see."

"Thankee, Massa."

"Jes' go to sleep. I said we see."

She nodded, cuddling up beside him, yet far enough away on the mattress that she did not touch him. She whispered, "You likes for me to hold him, Massa?"

"What? No. Let me alone. Damn it. I tell you what I want." He hated himself for raging at her. She was frightened, confused, and she wanted only to help him. He was getting ragged around the edges. Hell, the night world was getting ragged around the edges. "If'n I do git to sleep," he said, "don't you let nobody wake me up till sun-high in the mawnin'."

He heard her sniffling faintly, trying to bury her face in the pillow so that he would not hear her cry. But she was young, and soon she was asleep, breathing deeply and regularly. God, how he envied her. How he hated her. How he hated anybody who could sleep in this fouled-up universe. How could you let yourself go, be vulnerable and helpless in sleep, knowing the things that wandered in the night?

His eyes burned and ached and yet he could not sleep. He reached out once and touched the handgun on the bed table. He sighed. His lids grew heavy. He tried to keep vigil, but

could not. The house, the estate, the Alabama countryside, grew still. Distantly, a panther screamed like a woman in labor. A horse neighed. A barn owl called. And silence pressed in around him and whether he wanted to or not, he plunged into restless, restive sleep. Terrible, helpless sleep.

It began again with Mede's voice. Deep, mellow, basso but gentle, reticent, half-swallowed, as if Mede dared not speak aggressively, even in death. This made it no better; it intensified Ham's terror. It convinced him that the apparition—the ghost—whatever it was, was truly Mede returned from the dead to haunt him.

In his sleep he felt hackles quiver at the nape of his neck. He tried to force himself to waken, but he could not. It was as if he were bound by weightless yet unyielding shackles.

Then, as he lay helpless, there wafted in through the open window the sick-sweet cloying odors of boiled flesh. The smell hung in the atmosphere as if it had come through the window with the apparation.

He whimpered, agonized. Was this God's own torment? Was Mede's horribly peeling, seeping, almost liquid flesh to come shambling back every time Ham drifted finally into sleep? He had killed Mede. But Mede refused to die. Here he came now, arm outstretched, bony finger pointing, flesh leaking, bloody and stewed, pallid and proud, advancing, whispering. Ham struggled, but it was not until Mede's finger reached his forehead, almost touching him, that a sickening chill flooded through him and he sat up, screaming into the night silence. Her eyes wide, liquid with terror, Ellen sat up beside him. She caught his arm, shaking him. "Massa. What is it? What's the matter, Massa?"

He shoved her away, grabbing up the pistol. "They're here," he moaned. "They're all around me."

"What's here, Massa?"

"Things, I tell you." He could not bring himself to speak Mede's name, as if this might give him the solid form the appartion sought. "Things, damn you. The uncatchables. They're all around us. Damn it, girl, don't you hear them?"

"Didn't hear nothin', Massa."

Body drenched with sweat, Ham stared at her, admitting the most terrifying truth of all. No one but himself heard

Mede's voice. Ellen wouldn't lie to him. Anyhow, the voice would have terrified her until she would have been unable to speak. This did not mean that the uncatchables, and Mede himself, were not here. They were visible only to him. They came to haunt him, and only he himself could free himself from their terror.

As if agreeing with his reasoning, Mede's soft laughter rose tauntingly from the wall across the room. Gasping, Ham jerked the gun up and fired. A hole was blasted, gunpowder black, in the paneling. Outside the room, his father and servants shouted at Ham.

Ham paid no attention to the living. He grabbed up the Kentucky flintlock and fired it into the ceiling. But the noises inside the walls did not halt. The laugher rose again.

Ellen was screaming at him, but he only struck her with the back of his arm, thrusting her away. Miz Lucretia Borgia pounded on his door.

He got out of bed, loaded his handgun again. Lucretia Borgia shouted. "Open the door. Open the door, Massa."

He stopped in his tracks, staring at the sill of the corridor door. He saw the lamplight bouncing there, heard the moaning and crying from the servants. Miz Lucretia went on beating at the door.

IV

"Brain fever."

Doc Redfield spoke with the awful solemnity the occasion appeared to demand. He was a slender man, slightly under medium height, his gnarled hands liver-spotted and lined with black at the tip of his nails. His life had been devoted to his profession as veterinarian to the four-legged animals and the blacks owned by farmers and plantation squires of the surrounding parishes. He was, too, preferred by many white people as a medical doctor, despite his lack of a license to practice medicine on human beings. There were two medics with degrees in the town of Benson, but one, Dr. Willis Smith, was said to spread the clap wherever he went, through patients black and white. The other, Dr. Murrey by name, stayed drunk all the time. One might go to him with a head cold and end strapped on his operating table for an appendix removal. Warren hated them both, called them blackguards and scoundrels, and had threatened to shoot either physician who dared set foot on his land or to put his syphilitic fingers near one of his blacks. Therefore, when medical assistance was needed at Falconhurst, the Maxwells turned to Doc Redfield and the herb woman, Widder Johnson, from choice and necessity. Doc Redfield had recently wed the Widder Johnson of Seven Mile Road and moved into her large clapboard house, where he set up his own office. He'd been eating regularly and well since his marriage. Prosperity had added extra inches to his pot belly and suet to his narrow-shouldered frame. Often, after one of the widder's famous noon dinners, he unfastened the top button of his twill britches so that a roll

of fat protruded from under the bottom of his flowered waistcoat. His sparse red whiskers, streaked with gray, were streaked with corn and tobacco juice. The few teeth remaining in his mouth were only blackened stubs. His breath, as he knelt close over Hammond's bed, was almost obscene.

With old Warren Maxwell presiding, seated in a chair quickly shoved beside Ham's bed, the family and house servants had followed Doc Redfield and Widder Johnson up the stairs and now hovered in a council.

They stood around Ham's bed and Warren's improvised seat of authority, the vet, the widow watching his movements narrowly, Miz Lucretia Borgia, arms folded beneath her apron, Ellen, Mem. Farther from the bed, against the walls, several other house servants waited in silence.

For old Warren, the tension and waiting had drawn him fine. He was almost beside himself with worry over his son and heir. Ham was his life. Something happened to his son, he had no existence on this dark earth. Under his breath he warned God that if His cosmic plan, unknowable in human brains, included taking Ham away, God might as well plot to take Warren too. He would rage against God as long as he survived unless he were spared the horror of existence after Ham's death.

He held up his glass and Mem limped into the corridor and down to the kitchen to replace his fifth toddy and to reinforce himself with quick stolen gulps of corn. If it had not been for the toddies, Warren did not see how he could have endured the waiting. It seemed hours that Mem had been gone on that damned mule. Time for Ham to have died from neglect.

Memnon was gone for hours, while Maxwell drank his toddies and never stirred from beside Ham's twisted form on the stairwell landing. Lucretia cared for her beloved young master between her trips to replenish the father's toddies. Maxwell slouched beside his unconscious son and cursed the day Memnon had been whelped. It was almost daybreak, the darkest hour before dawn, when they heard the clatter of wagon, horse hooves and mule on the lane out front.

Miz Lucretia padded to the front door and watched the crow-hop gait of Widder Johnson's tired carriage horse in the lead of the dispirited caravan from Seven Mile Road. Widder

Johnson had to urge her horse with a blistering of hickory wand all the way to the front steps. There she crawled down, seeming to take forever, gathering up her leather bag of potions, herbs, roots, and stimulant gathered from secret glens by the lady herself.

Without waiting for Doc Redfield on his dun gelding and Mem, riding tender on his mule, a furlong behind the buggy, she came up the cedar-slab steps and Miz Lucretia held the front door open for her.

The widow jerked her head in silent greeting toward the black woman. She respected the colossal Lucretia Borgia, and the admiration was mutual. They were women and they understood how crucial they were in this man's world. For her part, the widow felt quite proud that her husband had been summoned to treat an ill Maxwell rather than the medics from Benson. It was for her a notable mission and she vowed to do all in her power to assure Doc's successful treatment.

Doc Redfield looked grave. "Brain fever. That's what it be, all right. Hit's brain fever. That's plain enough. That's what it is, all right. Brain fever."

Warren sank sobbing into his chair. He covered his ruddy face with his pain-gnarled hands. "Oh, Gawd. Help me, Gawd," he moaned. "My boy's a-sufferin' . . . got the brain fever . . . Oh, I knowed it all along. Jest couldn't bring myself to admit such a terrible thing . . . I'se seed it . . . in his maw's side of the family. . . . My poor child . . . With all he got to live for, he ill. Bad ill . . . oh, what's to become of him?"

"He make it all right, Warren," Doc Redfield said in a kindly tone. "Me and Widder here, we do all we can for him. We have him back spry in a week or two." He asked his wife with exaggerated politeness to bring a bottle of liquid laudanum and she immediately obeyed, opening her leather bag.

The widow produced the mason jar of opium derivative and Doc took it with the solemnity the occasion demanded. He filled a tablespoon with the juice and told Miz Lucretia to help the widow hold Ham down and pry open his mouth. "Rest," the vet said as he poured the laudanum into Ham's parted lips, then covered them with his palm while pinching

Ham's nostrils closed with thumb and forefinger, forcing the ill youth to swallow.

Ham struggled, regaining consciousness. He opened his eyes, and Warren cried out, "Hallelujah, holy Gawd. Hallelujah."

"What's the matter?" Ham said.

"You fell down the stairs," Doc told him.

Ham winced, recalling more than he permitted to the forefront of his mind. "I hurt?"

"You ain't broke nothin'. Might be a mite bruised. Tired. But nothin' broke. You jes' needs some rest."

"My God, yes. Tha's what I been needin'. Rest."

"Well, you gonna git plenty rest now. You gonna sleep. Ever' time you wakes up, night or day, somebody give you a tablespoon of this here laudanum so you goes back to sleep, till every drap in this mason jar is used up and you is all rested like new."

Ham struggled on the mattress, shaking his head from side to side. "How can I rest?" he wept. "I cain't sleep. I scairt to sleep. They comes at me when I sleeps."

Doc Redfield smiled and soothed his forehead with the flat of his palm. "No more, Ham. No more. You gone rest 'cause laudanum gone make you rest. Ain't no unlaid ghosts that gone git past this yere laudanum to fret you, son, not no more. Not no more."

It came to pass as the doctor had foreseen. Ham slept deeply, night and day; he was freed from the assault of the Furies that had pursued him. Life at Falconhurst became a routine of Ham's sleeping, waking, taking spoonsful of laudanum, gradually growing quiet for hours at a time.

At those rare times when Ham did waken, he suffered pangs of hunger and the skull-jarring batterings of a headache that made eating impossible. Warren Maxwell watched all these developments narrowly, padding on painful feet up in the steps and into Ham's bedroom a dozen times a day.

Ham existed in a vacuum, neither interested in nor aware of the changes of light and dark, of cold and heat, of noon and midnight. Wind blusters, showers, thunderstorms, the burst of dogwood and wild roses, all passed unnoted. The house was a solemn place. It was as if it stood nowhere, in a

kind of quiet waiting, watchful, and, even prayerful. Only Miz Lucretia continued to operate as usual. There was a great deal more for her to do, but she welcomed the responsibility; she seemed to possess wells of strength and energy untapped, and maybe even unsuspected.

When he did waken, Ham would allow no one to wait on him except his suddenly beloved Miz Lucretia. It was as if in many ways the opiate had returned him to the happiest time of his life, his childhood, when Miz Lucretia had come to Falconhurst to be his servant-for-life, his slave, his surrogate mother, his own mother having died at his birth. Miz Lucretia had spoiled him in childhood. Somehow he wanted to be spoiled again, and in his mind, no one did this as well and efficiently as the full-breasted, warm-smiling woman. He cost her a hundred trips a day up and downstairs.

Warren Maxwell leaned forward in his chair and tapped Doc Redfield's knee nervously with the ragged nail of his gnarled forefinger.

"Something's a troublin' me, Doc," he said. "Don't like to belittle you an' all, or find fault in no way. I feels you are doing all you can for my boy, a hell of a lot more'n I could hope for from them blackguard scalawag medical doctors in Benson—one of them spreadin' his clap even to the darkies, and the other'n staggerin' drunk most of the time. I been thinking how grateful I am that Ham has escaped them nightmares. But is we really gained anything if he turns out addicted to opium?"

"Addicted to opium?" Doc Redfield placed his glass aside and stared at his long-time friend. "Are you sittin' there a-sayin' that I—or the sterling-hearted widder would ever in this world leave your son addicted to some life-threatin' drug?"

Warren winched. "All I know is that he is livin' on the stuff right now. Damn nigh existing on it. What's to happen? You a-tellin' me that he'll just stop takin' that drug and be shed of it?"

Doc Redfield looked faintly sad. "I sorry to see you take such a mistrustful attitude as this, Warren. If'n you had axed me, I would have tole you right out you had nothin' to worry

about. Tell you what we goin' to do. Hit's been 'bout a week since Ham started on this prescription. Most of that mason jar of laudanum is used up. Might be a mite early, but when Widder Johnson arrives here today, I'll get from her the bottle of herbs mixed with laudanum that will wean your boy from any addictive effects of opium like he never had a taste of morphia."

"I never heard of that."

"Might be, you'll forgive me for sayin' so, Warren, might be a few medical advances that you ain't up on. Especially when it is a tonic prepared by the Widder Johnson. She tole me herself she was gettin' special banes from out to Pilan's Ditch to prepare a fresh batch for Hammond. . . . Stuff don't come cheap, but it efficacious. Efficacious as hell."

"An' you don't think it a mite too soon to wean Ham from the laudanum?"

Doc Redfield shrugged. "Might be. A tad. But little harm be done. He safe from the brain fever. We get's him back on his feet like new."

"You mind sayin' how this wondrous brew of the widder's works?"

Doc shrugged. "Ain't sure I know. She'll tell you all of its components when she gits here. She'll tell you how she brews and distills and mixes. But I ain't sure you'll understand, even then. She tell me that this yere yarb syrup is mixed with enough laudanum for taste and to lull the senses in case there is any withdrawal symptoms or pains. Like magic, there ain't no such pain or withdrawal agony. But the herbs do make the patient a mite ill at the stomach, queasy, so pretty soon, she say, he cain't no way abide the taste or the smell of the yarb or the laudanum."

"Praise the Lawd," Warren whispered. He smiled broadly at the same time his eyes brimmed with tears. He reached out a twisted hand and patted and stroked Doc's thigh. "Lawd's name be praise. Bless you, Doc. And bless the widder too."

Doc Redfield shrugged. "We do what we can," he said.

As soon as Doc Redfield began Ham on a regimen of the widder's newest tonic, everyone noticed a marked difference in the patient. Not every change was pleasant or encouraging.

Ham recovered with remarkable quickness physically, but the servants and visitors found him morose, withdrawn, dejected, his spirits drooping. One morning, about a week after Ham was on the new herb medicine, Warren limped into the dining room to find Ham eating a hearty breakfast.

"Thank the Lord," Warren said. "I know you needful."

"Why shouldn't I eat?" Ham demanded. "Some reason I shouldn't eat?"

"Lawdy no, son. I glad and happy. You needful. Been a long time since I seen you take out and eat with such a hearty appetite."

"I don't appreciate you watchin' me like a hawk all the time, neither," Ham said. He glared at his father across the table, face cold.

"My Gawd, son, if I watches you at all, it be because I love you. We all loves you."

"Sometimes I think I got to get away. Feel like people are drownin' me. Watchin' me. Pullin' at me. Watchin' ever' blesset thing I do." He jumped up from the table as he had not done since he'd been a teenager in a tantrum and threw his napkin on his plate.

"Where you goin', son?" Warren cried out.

At the door Ham hesitated and glared back across his shoulder. "I thinks I got to gits away from this place. I thinks mebbe I foller my dream and go where I been wantin' to go for so long—out to see the Texies I heard so much about."

He strode from the room. Warren heard the front door screech and slam. He shook his head and whispered. "Oh, son, no. No."

Miz Lucretia Borgia found Ham slouched on the top step of the gallery, elbow on his knee, the heel of his hand supporting his chin. He stared into the far distance west.

She went close to him and spoke in her gentlest tone. "You feel kindly under the weather, Massa?"

Ham jerked his head around. "I was all right. Until a certain nameless fat old black woman come out here a-spyin' on me . . . I got me a prime notion jest to bundle you up and send you back to that white gen'leman Mr. Roche in New Orleans what was fool enough to buy you."

Miz Lucretia Borgia simply smiled. She had heard Ham-

mond threaten to return her to that strange dwarflike man who ran a house of male infamy on Charles Avenue in downtown New Orleans, a place where her own twins Meg and Alph lived like some spoiled angels. She knew she would never go back there. Master Ham would never send her. She would never return alive. Even if Mr. Roche were weird enough to pursue her, she knew in her heart that the father and son Maxwells had learned the hard way that they could not manage Falconhurst Plantation without her. They would both suffer torture and death before they admitted this, but it was true, and in their hearts they all knew it, and with this, she was content.

"You nigh on broke your poor ole pa's heart," Miz Lucretia reproved him in her mild and loving tone.

"Tell him to leave me be. You leave me be."

"He jus' worried 'bout you. He loves you and he scairt for you. You got no call to break his poor ole sick heart like this."

"Where-at you think you gits the right to talk to me like that, woman?"

"From love. That jes' love talkin' to you an' you know it. You don't feel right inside an' I jes' wants to know why so's I kin help you."

"You can't help me, damn you. So let me alone. You think you so damn high and mighty. Sometimes I swear you forgits the color of your skin. You think you good as airy white lady. Better. Well, I can tell you. You is jest a nigger. A fat ole nigger woman. One of these here days, an' I still round this place, I gwine pick me out the bigges', blackest, ugliest bosal buck we got on this yere farm and I goin' give him you."

She laughed. "That soun' mighty appetizin', Massa. Nothin' a lady need more ever once in a while than a big rigid ole pecker what don't buckle in the middle."

"Damn you." He jumped to his feet. "You think I jokin' with you, don't you? Well, I ain't. An' you don't run this here farm. You jus' a nigger, like any other bush black we got on this farm. You got no fuckin' right to talk to me unless

and until I speaks first to you. Now git to hell away from me an' let me alone.''

He strode down the steps and plodded off across the yard. Miz Lucretia Borgia stood watching him go through the wind breaks, the plowed fields. She watched until he was out of sight in the farthest hammock and still striding away. She wiped at the tears filling her dark eyes.

Ham returned three hours later. He slumped into a rocker on the open gallery near the front entrance, but he spoke to no one. He heard Doc and his father in the parlor. He would have gone in there, but the heat from the fireplace would be intense. His father could never get warm enough anymore. Ham shivered. He could not stand the heat.

Miz Lucretia stood at the screened door and gazed fondly out at him, but she did not speak and he pretended he did not know she was there. After a brief time she went away.

The screened door whined open and slammed. Ham turned and saw his daughter coming toward him with a new cornshuck doll that one of the Negroes had made for her. She loved these dolls better than the store-bought kind. She loved being among the blacks too. She was down in the quarters most of the time.

He said aloud, ''You beginnin' to smell niggery, Sophie.''

She had almost reached his chair. She stopped as if he had struck her and gazed at him, her little crossed eyes turned in. ''Got a new dolly,'' she managed to say after a long time.

He nodded and tried to keep the distaste he felt for the sight of her from his face. She looked so much like no-good, cross-eyed Cousin Charlie, Blanche's brother. There had always been the possibility that an offspring of the union with Blanche would look like her side of the family. But why in God's name should one little skinny brat of a child be saddled with all the unpleasant family features? But it was not her ugliness, nor the musky smell, nor her passion for the blacks that offended him. She reminded him of her mother and he was not yet ready to think about Blanche, or to be reminded in any way of Blanche. Not yet. Jesus God. Not yet.

''Whyn't you run play?'' he said. He tried to keep the inner rages from his voice, but his tone grated and rasped at her.

"Don't you want to see my dolly?"

"Not now. No. I don't want to see no cornshuck doll with matchblack eyes, nose, and mouth. You got beautiful dolls. You got that doll your own grandma Woodford sent you. Whyn't you play with that instead of that dirty nigger doll?"

"I love this doll. It named for Mama."

"I don't want you namin' no damn dolls for your mama, either."

"Why not?"

"Don't take that tone with me. Not, because I say not, and that the onliest reason you need. When I say you do somethin', you do it, an' you don't ask me why." He watched the way she sucked in quick little breaths, but she went on smiling. "What you want?"

"You want to play dollies with me?"

"No. Not now."

"I'll git Gran'ma's dolly for you to hold. We can have a tea party. I'll have mama doll and you can have—"

"Did Lucretia Borgia send you out here to pester me?"

She gazed at him. "I not pesterin' you, Papa. Jes' wan't you play dollies with me."

"Well, I can't. Not now. You run play. Go on. Git."

She backed away to the front door, opened it, sidled inside. Then he heard her wailing as she ran through the dark corridor toward the kitchen. He felt a flaring of impatience. He did not hate Sophie or himself. It was that damned Lucretia Borgia who had sent the child to pester him.

It was no better for him in his bedroom. The Negroes were there to help bathe him, remove his boots, and lay out his nightclothes. And then Ellen pushing herself upon him, her body heated and musky, her eyes as frightened and troubled as a doe's eyes. He hated her when she was like that. Though he had felt an erection, the stirring of warmth in his loins when she got under the covers with him, he refused to let her near enough to discover his desire. "No. You git on the pad. I don't want you tonight."

Silently, Ellen slipped out of the bed and lay down on the pad beside his bed. He lay for a long time trying to figure some way he could get her back without appearing weak and wishy-washy. No. Damn it, he had made his decision. He

didn't want her crowding him. He didn't want anybody crowding him. They had to let him alone. They all had to let him alone.

He was up and out of the bedroom by daybreak. Dressed, he paused for a moment and gazed down at Ellen, sleeping on her stomach on the pad, the covers thrown off. He had heard her sniffling for what seemed hours last night.

He exhaled. He regretted that he had hurt her. She was a pretty child. Beautiful. She lived to please him. He would try to make it up to her sometime in some way, but not right now. He felt sweated, hemmed in, tied down, as if he could not breathe unless he got free.

He left the house and went down to the barn. He saddled his favorite mount. When a couple of the yard boys would have ridden with him, he raged at them. "I ast you to go? I axed either one of you to go with me? I didn't axe you, and don't want you. You black bastids got work to do. You do it, an' don't try to foller me around."

He rode swiftly away, pounding across the yard and not looking back.

In the next week, he rode every day, farther and farther from the farm, in dim trails of deepest hammocks, where he had not wandered since his boyhood. Everybody on the farm was pleased to see the young master take an interest in his horses, but it troubled them that he went forever alone; he refused even to accept any company. When Doc Redfield suggested he might use a little exercise on horseback, Ham had cut him off sharply. "I rather ride alone, Doc. You don't mind."

When Ham was gone out of the room, Warren said, "I think Widder might best bring some new tonic. Whatever is in these here yarbs, they curin' Ham dependin' on laudanum, all right, but I never seed the boy so deep with the molly-grubbs."

"Maybe I rides over today an' asts her what she got," Doc agreed. "Mayhap I stayed here long enough." His feelings were still sore from Ham's curt rejection. "Boy comin' along. Git along prime without me now."

"I don't agree," Warren said. "He seem worse off than ever."

"Jes' depression. He jes' depressed. I reckon a man don't go through hell and come back sunny and smilin' all the time. Maybe if we just give the boy some time."

"Good idee." Warren nodded enthusiastically. "You checks with the widder about some pleasant yarb to git Ham back to health, and I tells Lucretia and the others jus' to give the boy room. Let time do some work on him."

The elder Maxwell was pleased with this new plan. His anxieties for his son were not one whit lessened, but he resolved to let the boy work out whatever problem was eating at his bosom. That was the ticket. It was not easy, but Warren eased his tension with more and more toddies. He bit his lip often, but refused to approach Ham until his son spoke to him.

A thousand times in the next days he thanked God for the potency and heat of his toddies. They served him as an anodyne for the sorrow Ham bore alone and refused to let him or anybody share, or even discuss. Hammond returned from his rides, but when the older man asked him if anything of interest had happened, Ham replied curtly that nothing had. He had just ridden his horse until the animal tired, that was all. Ham did inquire about his father's affliction, about the pain of his joints, the fire of arthritis, the hammering ache of his bones. They spoke little and then only carefully. They skirted any subject which might open old wounds, at least the father did. Ham never introduced any new topic for conversation anymore. Ham came, he went, he sipped his toddies, he stared through opened windows into some distance where his father, or no one else, could follow.

Warren sat with Ham in the sunlight that flooded the east end of the veranda mid-morning. The sun felt good on his twisted hands and sore feet. Warm like this, with the sun baking him, he could almost hope again, almost find good in God's fouled-up world.

He sipped his toddy, watching the way Ham stared longingly into the western distance. Time was running out. Ham said nothing, but the youth was growing impatient, the impatience of the reckless young, the heat of the brokenhearted young.

Warren spoke at last, in an offhanded way, as if on an entirely unrelated matter. "Reckon we won't specialize in Mandingoes here at Falconhurst no more."

"Don't see no way you can, that Mede being dead. Ole Mr. Wilson no good and nobody to mate to Big Pearl, and Miss Lucy gettin' past her birthin' years."

"Too bad, though. They some gyacutus niggers, them Mandingoes."

Ham swung his arm. "I not wantin' to talk about them. I kilt that Mede 'cause I had to. Make no difference he a perfect specimen—"

"Maybe the las' perfect specimen in this whole country," Maxwell observed in an offhand manner. "We all know they never brought more'n a handful of them perfect Mandingans to these shores."

"One was too many. Them treacherous bastids."

"They don't has to be treacherous—"

"Maybe they don't has to be. But they is. Mede done proved that. I done everything to keep that nigger prime. I treated him better'n airy animal I ever owned. Better'n a lot of human beings is treated."

"Amen. I can say amen to that." Maxwell nodded.

"An' look how he paid me back. A-rapin' a white lady. No gentleman can stand that, havin' a woman what carry on that way with a black buck."

"Oh, I ain't suggestin' that what you done wasn't right. I solid support you all the way. It just that it seems sad they ain't goin' to be no more perfect specimens like Mede no more. Not in this country."

"I could find a specimen. Better than Mede. Had I the wish, I could grow an even better-lookin', sleeker animal."

"Take a long time. Breedin' fine animals like the Mandingoes ain't no overnight job."

"Well, it not matter. I not cravin' no more treacherous Mandingoes. If I had one, I'd castrate him first off, and that would spile him fer breedin' and them bastids ain't good fer nuthin' else."

"Ten. Twelve. Fifteen thousand. On the auction vendue. Ain't hardly no limit to what a man could ask for a perfect Mandingo specimen like Mede. If a man had one. Or more.

In a few years the market price be out of sight. For the man breedin' Mandingan blacks, wealth beyond any dream."

Ham was silent for a long time, a look of illness in his gray face. The old man knew he had struck a nerve. From boyhood, Ham had been fascinated and obsessed with breeding the finest of the black race. He had indeed taken tender loving care of Mede. And now it was all over. Like all his other dreams for his son, this one was ended too.

Warren said no more. He let the suggestions he had made simmer in his son's mind. A man with a passion is unlike all other men. Ham's greatest passion was breeding perfect black specimens. He had devoted at least five years to Mede's conditioning, training, and honing before it all erupted in this tragedy. Just now, Ham was disgusted, disenchanted, dispirited. But the need to excel still boiled deep inside him, Warren knew, because in his time he had had his own passions.

At dinner that night, as if almost speaking to himself, Warren said, "No way a man could find a perfect specimen like that Mandingo Mede was, anyhow."

"Not in this country," Ham spoke apparently without interest. "None like Mede. That boy was built like the cedars of Lebanon."

"I never saw another one quite like Mede, did you?"

"You know I never has."

"Never one so perfect—"

"—and so sneakin'."

"Still, it might help you get well an' you did find a new fightin' buck to put your mind to."

"Don't want to have nothin' to do with Mandingoes, Pa. I tole you. They like a weasel in the chicken pen. Watchin' a weasel won't do you no good. And Mandingo's the same. A-sneakin' in to bed down a white woman when my back was turned."

"Ain't sayin' that ain't a fearful, unforgivable thing. But what I hope and pray is that you can put that behind you. Maybe somehow you expected too much of Mede. He ain't a civilized human like you an' me. He gits a terrible need all he knows is to satisfy it, same as airy other animal."

"That may be. Still I cain't forgive."

"Nobody askin' you to forgive. Askin' you for the sake of

your own good health to *forget*. Put it behind you. Remember Mede was an animal, son. The Bible say about blacks, an' I ain't one to go against the Good Book. Bible say blacks is the sons of Ham, they like beasts of the field, they beasts of burden, born to serve they masters. But they animals. They animals what can talk. But you can't no way expect of an animal what you might of a white man, not even of an animal what can talk."

Ham spoke tautly to his plate. "I done what I had to do."

"Nobody gainsayin' that, son. Cain't nobody speak contrary to what you done. You done what a southron gentlemen, any man of honor, had to do. You done the onliest thing you could. But now you got to get well, you has done it, and that's the end of it."

"If it's ended, why am I sick like this? Sick in the head. Sick in the heart."

"Because you lettin' your mind dwell on it. It's a bad thing, but it's over. What you needs to do is find yourself another beautiful specimen like Mede and start over." Warren added hastily, but without sincerity, "Whether you starts over here or in the Texies."

"Ain't no way to find a specimen like Mede. You think all the time I was nigger-fightin' Mede, and showin' him off from Natchez to New Orleans, that if somebody else had had a better specimen—or even one they thought could beat my Mede—they wouldn't of come forward with him? An' no way to bring a Mandingo from Africa. Both Britain and America has outlawed import, sale, or transporting slaves on the high seas. They outlawed entry of black slaves in every U.S. port. Jes' no way."

Warren dared to hope again. At least Ham was discussing the matter. What did they say, a journey of a thousand miles starts with one small step?

"They other kinds of niggers that are good lookers. Some make good fightin' bucks."

Ham shook his head. "Even if I was interested—an' I not—nothin' but a purebred Mandingo would do for me."

"Maybe we can put out some feelers. Maybe some way we can find you a new specimen as pure as Mede—"

"No." Ham stood up. "No way to do that."

Warren smiled as if he had no cares in the world. "No way. Less'n you willing to spend money. One thing I learned in the heah life. Money can accomplish anything. Ain't nothin' money won't buy exceptin' a cure for arthritis. You spend enough money in the right places. With the right people. They let you do anything you want to do. In fact, they help you do it when the price is right."

V

Doc Redfield rode with Ham into the village of Benson the following Saturday morning. Though Ham had the terrible sense that the people of the parish would snigger and whisper and point at the man whose wife pestered and pleasured with blacks, he finally agreed. For him it was a kind of test. The first man who laughed would send Ham on west to the farthest plains of Texies, maybe without even coming back to Falconhurst to pack or to say good-bye.

It was a day on which few chores were ordinarily performed by the slaves of Falconhurst. The Negroes with ambition enough cleaned their own cabins, washed, mended, and ironed their own simple clothing. Some cultivated their own kitchen garden patches. There was no call for anyone to supervise the blacks on this day. And the fact that it was Saturday gave the trip to Benson some extra excitement too. On Saturday the bettors and the fight crowd from all the surrounding farms and estates gathered at Pearl Remmick's tavern. If there were ever any rousing action going on in Benson, it had to be on a Saturday.

With his favorite horse under him, the saddle reassuring between his legs, Hammond felt almost human again. The freshened horse broke into a slow canter which pleased its master and matched his mood. Sunshine drenched Ham, reinvigorating and restoring him.

A light rain had whipped in a few hours before dawn and had gathered itself into a thunderstorm by daybreak, emptying the leaden skies and laving the landscape until the entire countryside glittered fresh and clean and new. The sun had

reared above the fog-wisped horizon in a stunning glare. The only clouds remaining behind the storm were small scattered mare's tails against the intense blue. The winds touched at the wet earth, blow-drying the underbrush, the loblolly pines and the great elm leaves.

In the few miles between Falconhurst and the settlement at Benson, the two riders passed perhaps a dozen homes, few of them larger than two-room country shacks. The white-pillared Johnstone mansion gleamed in the hot rays of the sun. Most of the farms had been neglected, overplanted, and not husbanded as to water and fertilizer. Few were productive anymore, but their owners hung on, from habit and necessity. They had nowhere else to go; they knew no other life except the hard row of scrabble farming.

"You plannin' to raise nigger crops once you gits to the Texies?" Doc inquired.

"Hadn't planned that far ahead, Doc. Maybe I've had enough breedin' niggers to last me all my days. I 'on't know yet. Won't truly know until I get out there to the Texies, I reckon."

"Heard they ain't much call for nigger slaves out in the Texies yet," Doc Redfield said. "But raisin' blacks for market ain't no overnight crop nohow. You might jes' be gettin' in on the ground floor."

"Well, I reckon to go. Whether to stay or not, raise cotton or niggers for sale is all in the future. Look round first. Sorry about Papa's aches. But I got to go. Fortunes will be made in the Texies, I know that."

Doc laughed. "Know jes' the kinda itch you got, son. The kind that you cain't no way scratch. I had it a few times when I was young. I longed to go on all the way out to Californy, because I heard it was settled mostly by Spanish and Indians and all the talk them days was of the black-eyed senoritas who were so hot around the edges they didn't even wear no underpants and stroked theirselves with hot tamales and fiery peppers when warn't nairy men round to do it for 'em. Didn't do it, though. Got into medicine. Got married. Next thing you know all I had was memories and then just the faint recollection of memories."

"Pa keeps talkin' to me about findin' myself a new fightin'

buck to take the place of Mede. I know all Pa wants is for me to stay around here. He thinks if I got a new fightin' buck, I'd forgit about the Texies. He cain't believe I don't care about the fightin' nigger sport no more. Had a bellyful with Mede."

"Well, you do what you will. I know that's what your paw wants, and that's what you got to do. You stay here and train yourself a new fightin' black with all the experience you had trainin' and fine-honin' Mede, you soon have the best fightin' nigger in all Alabama ag'in. I'd bet the farm on that. You'd have the best."

"Don't want the best. Don't want none at all. Cain't make you or Paw believe that. I wants to git away from here and all the ills I knowed here."

Doc shook his head. "They is jus' one thing about tryin' to outrun your woes. Mind you, I ain't talkin' ag'in the Texies. But I is sayin' you tote your own miseries right in your own poke bag. You take 'em with you. You don't never outrun 'em. If I've learned anything in my misspent life, I've learned that."

"Anyhow," Ham said as if he'd not even heard Doc, or had not understood him if he did hear, "an' I ever found me a specimen I figured was fine enough to train to be the best fightin' nigger in the state, I wouldn't stay round here. None of these young bucks what want to put up their nigger against your'n got any money. You ends up takin' the fightin' nigger, or if they got young niggers in their work party, you take them instead of money."

"Young niggers is jus' like money in the bank," Doc said.

"Yeah. But I got money in the bank. Pa got enough to live like a rajah an' he never sell another Falconhurst nigger. Me too. He got more money buried in cook pots round Falconhurst than most rich people ever even see in a lifetime. He don't need me to work the place. An' I don't need to raise a nigger for fightin' to make a livin'. Onlies' thing I'd ever want to do is train the best, the pertiest, the finest, the strongest. If'n I could git me a young buck like that, I'd hone and pet and pamper and brine him and learn him to fight, scientificlike."

"I'd like to be round to see that," Doc Redfield said with a deep sigh.

"Ain't none like that no more."

"Not since Mede." Ham swore. "Not since that bastid Mede."

When they arrived in Benson, the main street and the curbs around the courthouse yard were lined with wagons, carts, shays, coaches, and buggies from all the countryside. The largest assemblage of men was around Pearl Remmick's ordinary across from the courtyard. They saw many of their friends, among them Lewis Gassaway, Dave Twitchell, and Don Johnstone. They all waved or doffed their planter's hats. Hammond felt himself go tense. This was the first test. He watched narrowly but caught no suggestion of snigger or sneer. He exhaled heavily.

They tied up their horses at a leather-slicked hitch rail near the general store and then sauntered at a long angle across the street toward the tavern. Tender blades of vulnerable grass showed here and there through cracks of the narrow wooden sidewalk that bordered the business side of the street. Between two weedgrown lots stood a slanty frame building with false front and batwing double doors. Windows were so grimy no one could see through them. The facade of the place was smeared and pocked and grimed with ancient dust, red-tinted in the sun.

Doc and Ham went under the apronlike awning and entered the tavern. This was a long room, the place crowded on Saturday with men drinking beer and sweating as they waited for the nigger-fighting to begin out back. They shouted at one another, everybody talking and nobody seeming to listen.

The bartender stopped serving everybody else when Doc and Hammond Maxwell found a place at the bar. It was easy to see in Pearl Remmick's smile that if Ham were not the most important man in the county, he was the heir to that man. Few did not know that young Hammond had been running Falconhurst alone for the past few years, the old man ailing and all.

One might have thought Doc and Ham were the only two men in the place with cash to pay for drinks the way Pearl smiled and smote the bar, scrubbing it with his bar cloth and making them welcome in his high-pitched effeminate voice and cackling laughter. Pearl was a huge man, with heavy red

jowls, hard blunt hands, close-cropped hair, and that booming, fluting laugh. "What'll it be, gentlemen?"

By the time Hammond had ordered for himself and Doc, they were surrounded by Lewis Gassaway, Don Johnstone, young Twitchell, and others, slapping Ham on the back and remarking how long it had been since he'd been around. Lewis Gassaway pressed in between Doc and Hammond, speaking from the side of his mouth in a sotto voce whisper, "Don't wander away Ham. Think we might be in for some real fun."

"That so?" Ham watched him narrowly. "What's that?"

"Might be a leetle tar and featherin'," Lewis said. "How's that to liven up your Sattiday afternoon, huh?"

"Don't know. Depends on who's gettin' the tar and feathers."

"Don't rightly swear to it yet, Ham. But they's a fuckin' abolitionist preacher in town."

"You're jokin'."

"No, I ain't. There is a real, genuine, stinkin' polecat of a pipsqueak abolitionist preacher done dared to come in to Benson—on a Sattiday, talkin' against slavery."

"You seen him yet?"

"Not yet. But I know he's here. He had a room last night with the Baptist minister and his wife. I heard that for gospel. They say that bastid is goin' to preach—an' maybe even take up a collection out there on the courthouse yard. Goin' try to tell us how our niggers is just as human as we are, as good as we are, and some even better, 'cept for the color of they skin. Now, what you think of that?"

"I think the gentleman be mighty lucky do he git out of Benson without a new coat o'tar and feathers," Ham said.

"You with us?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"Well, think about it, man, think about it. Son of bitch comin' in here with that abolition talk."

Other young men crowded in, interrupting to ask if Hammond had a fightin' buck on the card. Every man knew that Hammond Maxwell's fighting Negroes were the most dangerous, the best-trained, somehow the toughest and the most willing to fight.

Ham shook his head. "No. Got no buck on today's card."

"Goin' to have one soon?" Somebody wanted to know.

Ham shook his head again. "Don't reckon."He took a long pull on his beer.

"Hey, Hammond, what happened to your Mandingo fighter?"

Ham stiffened, his heart sinking and his belly going empty. He looked around in the crowd, trying to find the man who had shouted that question. He checked to see if the man was baiting him, suspicious, or sniggering. If whispers were abroad, these men would be trying to wheedle out the truth by appearing friendly, or even overfriendly.

No one seemed laughing at Ham, or to be glancing knowingly about the press of young men. He exhaled. They seemed honest enough. At least he would give them the benefit of the doubt. They knew as well as he did if they pressed him, they were asking for trouble, and he never had backed down from duel or fight, and he never would.

"Had to kill the Mandingo," Ham said.

"What happened? He git chawed up in a fight?"

Ham sighed and nodded. "Something like that," he said. "Yeah. Something like that."

The tavern was now overcrowded, milling with shouting men and boys, their Negroes pressed against the rear wall, adult white men at the long bar, the younger boys standing among the shabby wooden tables or lounging on benches. Most of the youths had only nickels, dimes, or quarters to wager on likely black fighters. They pushed among their elders trying to discover the best bet of the day, being touted from one buck to another, and touting each other.

Pearl Remmick accepted these bothersome youths because they would grow into regular drinking, betting, eating customers, but sometimes when his place was overrun like this, they tried his patience. He refused to hold stakes on their petty dime-and-quarter wagering, and he kept yelling at them to stand back and not bother the older men who were trying to enjoy a cold brew before fight time.

"Drink up," Pearl kept admonishing his customers, walking among them, scrubbing his hands on his discolored apron. "Almost fight time."

According to Elijah Gassaway, who had made a count, there were six fighting bucks, a couple of them from as far away as Florence. When his brother, Lewis, and Hammond asked for his rating of the fighters, he admitted he had felt a few of them in the nuts but found nothing unusual. "An ordinary bunch," was his conclusion.

"These heah fights always ordinary 'lessen your Mede is fightin'," Lewis said, admiration dripping from his voice.

Ham winced, remembering. He had prepared Mede well for these fights, though few of them ever proved worth the effort. He felt a terrible sense of emptiness and loss. He drank deeply and ordered another beer laced with corn whiskey.

"First call. First fight. Gentlemen, please take your places. And you managers, please get your fighters ready for the first fight."

Owners and bettors were still negotiating matches, placing bets, hedging, or sealing their bargains in whiskey. They milled through the back doors to a muddy yard enclosed within a six-foot wooden fence and furnished with pine-slab bleachers supported against the wall of the tavern. Men still entrusted their bets for Pearl, who stood with money leaking between his fingers and spilling from his pockets. Younger white boys skylarked and tussled and made so much noise that Pearl had to threaten to throw them all out before he could get quiet to announce the first bout.

"Hope your bets is all placed," Pearl said, standing in the muddy fighting space before the bleachers. "Has you gentlemen drunk all the whiskey you want?" They answered him raucously and obscenely, and he merely laughed, waiting for quiet.

Pearl swung his arms, motioning for the gentlemen and their fighters to approach for the first match. Two owners appeared leading their naked slaves through the rear door. Whistles and shouts greeted the sight of the two nude gladiators. Pearl's bartender, a gentleman named Holden, remained in the doorway to keep his eye on the barroom and the remaining fighters against the inside wall. The owners did not like their blacks to witness the matches. Sometimes nothing discouraged a fighter more than seeing the blood and gore and violence of a preceding encounter.

The shouting and anticipatory crowd sat and stood in every available foot of ground around the cleared space, an ill-defined ring. On opposite sides of this mud-hole the owner stood scowling beside his fighter. Pearl stood in the center of the ring, arm raised over his head.

"Now, I want ever'body to stay back, please, and keep the goddamn ring open for the fuggin' varmints to have room to fight." Pearl swung his money-laced hand and stepped to the sidelines. Owners whispered last-minute instructions and shoved the fighters forward.

The black boys approached cautiously. The smaller, a good foot shorter than his opponent, was already terrified and had to fight back tears. The crowd screamed for action. For a moment they circled, like banty roosters, neither landing a blow.

Watching, Ham was already growing bored and somehow put off. He could see it was not going to be much of a fight. The boys were afraid of each other. The taller was no fighter at all, as far as Hammond could see, and only his size terrified his opponent.

Suddenly they lunged at each other. The bigger boy began to gouge at the smaller one's eyes. The boy screamed in pain and his screams electrified the mob. They wailed their delight. Emboldened Tall Boy struck the other in the mouth and kept hitting until his thick lips bled profusely, getting blood on both contestants. Tiny tried to thrust Tall Boy upon his back, or even on his side, but Tall Boy was too heavy for him; he could do nothing but lie there accepting punishment. They struggled in the mud, rolling over and over until they were plastered with the sour earth, no longer able to get a firm grip on each other.

Around him, men yelled, satisfied with the fight they were seeing, but for Hammond it was poor, stupid, and should have been halted. He was sorry he had come. He had nothing against watching black animals fight to the death as cocks and pit bulls did on other Saturdays, but he found no excitement in this amateurish display.

The exhausted fighters would have quit, but the spectators pelted them with mud-balls and their owners threatened them with pick axes which Pearl kept against the fence in case of

riot. Forced to remain in the mud-ring though they were agonized and terrified, the bucks struggled for more than twenty minutes without a break. Neither owner would allow his man to surrender. His gentleman's honor was at stake. Tiny bit the ear off Tall Boy and the blood spurted and still they would not allow the fight to end. Finally, it seemed neither combatant could move anymore. They maneuvered around until their bodies were parallel but inverted. It was the only way they could protect their bleeding eyes, torn mouths, or truncated ears. The mob yelled, calling them black bastard cowards, but they continued to struggle in this odd position in the blood-streaked mud. Suddenly Tall Boy slipped his legs over each side of Tiny's head and neck, catching him in a fatal scissors grip. Tiny flailed and gasped and flopped. The crowd thought this was the most comical sight they'd yet beheld. When Tiny could no longer breathe, he suddenly twisted his head and closed his teeth on Tall Boy's scrotum.

Tall Boy screamed at the utmost pitch of his voice, an agony that blared against the highest heaven and reverberated inside the walled yard. His scream of pain was almost as loud as the ringsiders' delighted laughter.

Tall Boy released his scissor grip on Tiny's head. In fact, Tall Boy spraddled his legs apart as far as he could, screaming with every breath, as if to reassure Tiny that he would not assault him again in that way.

Tall Boy sprawled on his back. He beat at the mud on both sides with his splayed hands. He screamed for mercy. Now maddened with terror and pain, Tiny refused to release his grip on Tall Boy's scrotum. He gritted his teeth, ground them, chewing without letting up the pressure.

Tall Boy's owner grabbed up a pick ax and ran into the ring with it. Tiny's owner drew a gun from his belt and they stood for a moment above the prostrate gladiators. "Stop him," Tall Boy's owner ordered. "He's a-killin' a sound buck."

"He was sound," somebody yelled. "No more."

"Tall Boy sing soprano now."

"Stop him, goddamn it," Tall Boy's owner repeated as Tall Boy's screams weakened.

Tiny's owner nodded, but when he kicked Tiny in the belly

and yelled at him, the black no longer heard in his madness. The crowd roared with laughter. "That boy eatin' good fer the first time in his life," somebody yelled.

"He ain't lettin' go a good thing," another shouted.

"Told you it was good eatin'," another yelled from the crowd, and the mob roared its approval.

Tiny's owner kicked Tiny again and again. The black boy writhed and twisted in the mud but would not release his death grip on Tall Boy's vitals. Tall Boy's screams were wavering now into madness. He sobbed, he raged, he mewled.

"You got to break him loose," Tall Boy's owner raged.

"How I gonna do that?" Tiny's master yelled back. They stood over their fighters, sweated.

Tall Boy's master turned the pick ax in his fist. Tiny's owner yelled in protest, but made no move to stop him. When the ax struck Tiny's skull, the bones and matter smashed with the sound of a splitting watermelon. Tiny shuddered and lay still, but still bit down in death on his opponent.

Filled with a nameless sickness that had nothing to do with that carnage in the mud-ring, Hammond got up from the bench and pushed his way through the crowd toward the rear entrance of the barroom. All he wanted was to get out of there.

He saw over his shoulder that Tiny still gripped Tall Boy's testes pouch in death. The crowd was yelling suggestions. Finally, using the head of the pick ax, Tall Boy's owner was able to pry Tiny's mouth open with the steel blade.

Tall Boy flopped out on his back, mutilated and bleeding fiercely. His master stared at the useless, half-dead slave. Then he leveled the gun and shot him in the face. "Had to put him out of his misery," he said to nobody in particular.

The crowd was raging, insensate. Some swore this was the best match they'd ever witnessed at Pearl Remmick's. Others vowed that the fame of Pearl's would spread, bringing the high-rolling gamblers from as far away as New Orleans and maybe even Natchez.

Tall Boy's master stood with the gun in his hand. "Somebody ought to pay," he raged. "I got me a dead nigger on my hands."

The crowd roared its merry approval. Somebody said,

"Sure, I'll pay you, fellow. You tell me what a dead nigger is worth an' I'll pay it. Every fuggin' penny."

The raging laughter of the ringsiders followed Ham out into the barroom. Pearl Remmick ran after him. "Where-at you goin', Mr. Maxwell, suh? Fun's just starting. . . . You don't want to go now. We got us a Geechee nigger from the Carolina coast country. They sat 'at sucker's bite is deadly as airy rattlesnake's."

Hammond smiled, thanking the bar owner for his concern, but he shook his head. "Jes' cain't keep my mind on it." He gave an apologetic wave of his hand and walked out of the bar into the sunlit street.

Behind him, he heard the raging of the sweated, aroused fight crowd. Then, his eyes becoming accustomed to the sudden blinding glare of the Alabama afternoon sunlight, he saw a crowd gathered around a flatbed wagon drawn up from the street into the shade of an elm in the courthouse yard.

A sinking sensation in his belly, Hammond paused on the edge of the wooden sidewalk and stared at the growing crowd around the wagon. Mostly it was older women, middle-aged females, and young girls, but he was surprised to see how many males were over there too. This was going to be an abolition preacher's meeting, just as Gassaway had predicted. Ham hadn't really believed it, because most missionaries, even if they came representing Jesus Christ himself, faced death when they started preaching the evils of slavery in this part of the country.

With a faint twisted smile Hammond wondered how many men had died in the name of Jesus Christ who preached peace, living and letting live, doing unto others. He shook his head.

The men stared up at that itinerant minister as raptly and avidly as the women. Among them were many that Ham had most often seen at Pearl Remmick's nigger fights. But, he admitted, in this belt, many men found devil-fighters even more arousing than black battlers. A man felt he was so filled with sin, with so little hope of heaven, he grabbed at any straw that might somehow pull him up from evil into paradise. And too, there was not a man present—and hardly a

woman—who did not believe the preacher faced death by hanging or tar and feathers.

Ham hunkered idly against the concrete water trough and metal hitching rack and watched the missionary at work in the shadowed, crowded courtyard. He scowled, watching. It was a strange ceremony, unlike any preaching Hammond had ever seen before.

The program opened with a linsey-robed choir. These locally recruited musicians sang about freedom in death, of joining Jesus across the Jordan, of trading ease and comfort in this sad world for glory and redemption in the next.

When the singing died against the uproarious screams from the fighting arena across the main street, three harried-looking young Yankees went through the crowd with tambourines soliciting donations which would enable Brother Merrill Hallwell to continue his missionary work among the heathens of this wicked earth. Even if Ham had not realized the collectors were strangers, he would have known them as outsiders. Yankees were easy to recognize in a southern rural community—the flush-eyed, apple-cheeked, kissed-in-the-face-by-a-camel features. They were Yankees all right. Brother Merrill Hallwell trusted locals with the music, but not with the cash.

Brother Merrill Hallwell himself appeared next, waddling, his face wreathed in smiles, on planks to the flat bed of the wagon. Hammond was not so much surprised by the evangelist's confidence-man appearance as by the gullibility of his audience. It seemed to Hammond that he had never in his existence beheld so patently, blatantly false and unctuous a practitioner for God. Admittedly, devotion came in all forms and packages, but this gawdy man looked to be mocking his flocks by his own false smiling and by his greasy and oleaginous corpulence. Brother Merrill presented the sort of well-fed sleekness that denied a penny to starving heathens.

Brother Merrill Hallwell waved his bulbous arms and laughed. His body shook. He was stout, his head was round, his cheeks were full, his small eyes almost lost in porcine sockets. He had that look of the well-situated minister who eats lavishly every Sunday and stuffs himself through the week—fried chicken, chicken dumplings, potatoes, gravies, hams, fatty beefs, and rich pork, all at the expense of others. Ham admitted he was judging the stranger at first glance. But

no. Hallwell's appearance repelled Ham far less than the obsequious manner, the fawning, false way he kept smiling at his congregation as if promising them a heaven he had never glimpsed himself and never would. As far as Ham could see, Brother Hallwell sold religion the same way medicine-show spielers sold snake oil.

Brother Merrill Hallwell kept talking about God, but watching the servile, mealy-mouthed man smiling that briar-eating smile, Hammond wondered if even a forgiving Jesus Christ himself would buy a used camel from this man preaching in his name.

At first Ham paid little attention to what Hallwell was shouting, the same old tired rhetoric about the enslaved blacks, all of whom were brothers under that dark skin, the evils of slavery, the immorality of the wealthy men who practiced its evil, growing rich on the suffering of others. He painted grim and angry pictures of blacks shipped in the middle passage aboard filthy tramp trawlers, hidden between decks, lying in their own vomitus, and then addressed in tongues alien to them and treated like animals by strangers who beat and burned and starved them if they did not obey words they didn't even comprehend.

"Put yourselves for one moment in their place, my dear children, if you will," Reverend Hallwell pleaded.

"Suppose you were taken from this glorious, rich homeland, where you are master of all you survey, transported cruelly, treated like animals, thought to be stupid and ignorant, and less than human because you could not understand an alien tongue?

"Might you not find yourselves despondent, depressed, even half-crazed with fear and frustration? No matter how intelligent and smart you were acclaimed to be in your own environment, once you were treated like a pack animal, might you not respond like the jackass, simply to be allowed to exist?

"Think about it, my dear children. Are these blacks then stupid and animallike because they are animals, or because not knowing them, or their customs, or their heritage, we perceive them as animals?

"I have seen these people in their own environment. I have

been to their native land, where they are majority and we the minority, the outsider. I have seen their great artwork, their inventions, and their achievements. I have seen them educated as few of us are educated. They study in Cairo, in Jerusalem, in Paris, and in London.

"As a missionary, I have seen them in their own homes. They are a fine and glorious race of people. Beautiful, intelligent people. I know I can talk myself blue in the face, unable to convince even one of you that the black man is more than a beast of burden, but—if somehow I could bring one of those great specimens over here from his native Africa—let him stand among you, talk to you, tell you about himself and his people, then I could make you see how beautiful and brilliant these blacks are in their own environment, when they are treated as men and not as beasts."

At these last words, Hammond felt something turn over inside him, even when he did not know fully what it was. It had nothing to do with conversion, revelation, or accepting the minister's words. He felt the same contempt for the man and his so-called beliefs and facts, but something the missionary had said stirred a reaction inside.

He straightened slightly, standing in a patch of sunlight. Hallwell went on haranguing his listeners: Blacks are not animals. Blacks are human. As human as you and me. They are as we are the children of Adam, of Abraham.

A raucous voice hammered back from the street. "Maybe they are *your* brothers, mister, but I'm white, and they're just coons as far as I can see."

"That's because you are blind, Brother," Hallwell said with that false smile. "And none is so blind as he who will not see."

"We gwine teach you to see, preach." A man yelled from the street.

For the first time, Ham realized how raptly he had listened to the fat cleric's sermon. The fights had ended in Pearl Remmick's arena across the street. Sweated with whiskey and roused by the sight of blood, half a hundred men spilled out into the street looking for the excitement.

He had not even realized that Doc Redfield had sauntered across the street and perched on the water trough beside him,

almost smacking his lips in anticipation of Saturday afternoon violence.

And violence was coming. Even Brother Hallwell recognized it on the bed of the wagon. He checked over his shoulder to see that his team of horses were hitched and ready to roll. Ham watched him pityingly. No matter how fast his horses, he had no chance in a race against these bloodthirsty attackers.

Lewis and Elijah Gassaway were in the lead of the vigilantes. One might have thought this was a spur-of-the-moment protest against an outsider until one saw the smoking vat of tar, the croker sacks of feathers in a wagon being brought toward the courtyard.

"We don't want you triflin' loafers interferin' in our business," Lewis shouted, and twenty men roared approval. "Slavery was ordained by God. By God, they ain't nothin' you can do about it, comin' in here with your lies and stirrin' up troubles among God-fearin' people. We got to have niggers to grow cotton. You Yankees got to have cotton to feed your northern factories. You wants to set all them niggers free, is that it, Mr. Preacher?"

Hallwell was pale but firm. He went on smiling that obsequious smile. "I just trying to help you folks see the errors of your ways."

Elijah Gassaway laughed. "You the one made the error, Mister. A-comin' in here stirrin' up good folks against the ways that are God's ways. . . . But when we through with you, you goin' have a lot of time to think about the wrong you tried to do here today. By the time you gits all the feathers and tar out'n your ass and your ears, you'll know we right."

A roar of approving laughter greeted this. Emboldened, Lewis Gassaway thrust through the crowd and leaped up on the flatbed. He shouldered the missionary aside. "This here polecat done come from the North tryin' to tell us that niggers better'n us. Says they human. Makin' out they jus' the same 'ceptin' for a slight difference in the color of their skin. What he know 'bout niggers, 'bout they clap and gonorrhea, the dirty way they live and lie and cheat and steal? Down heah, we lived with niggers all our lives. We know niggers better'n

any Yankee. You think the niggers you know is human? I been raisin' niggers long as I kin remember. Likes 'em fine, I do. I treats 'em well and keeps them in their place. They happy. I happy. Now come this fat man stirrin' up trouble and sayin' it ain't good enough we live in peace with the blacks, we got to take 'em in our homes and marry 'em and live with 'em, like they do in the North. I tell you a nigger ain't no human being. No more'n a horse or a cow is a human being. Niggers is niggers and white folks is white. An' we don't need no dirty abolitionists comin' in here tryin' to say different."

Men were pushing their women to the rim of the crowd, ordering them out of the area, off the streets, away from the site of this necessary but evil business that had to follow. Northern troublemakers had to be sent a message. They could not come into the peaceful South stirring up trouble and expect to escape without paying a terrible price.

"Bring that tar and them feathers right up here," Lewis Gassaway called. "We show this northern gentleman how warm southern hospitality really is."

"No!" Hallwell's scream was almost a woman's cry of terror. He leaped around, scrambling over the boot of the flatbed and grabbing for the reins and whipstock.

He didn't even make it over the seat rest. Half a dozen laughing, raging men clutched him and dragged him down onto the wagon flooring, where he writhed like a cockroach on his back.

Ham shook his head as if abruptly coming awake from a deep sleep. He felt almost astonished to find himself in this place, the sun-struck street, the maddened mob, the terrorized missionary, the crying women and screaming children. He had no plan, no reason to interfere with what Lewis Gassaway and his friends planned to do, and yet he was going to stop them without even really knowing why. It was something the fat Hallwell had said, something Ham could not fully explain even to himself yet, but whatever it was, it convinced him that it was not time for Brother Merrill Hallwell to die here in this hot little town. There was no profit in a death like this, no profit for nobody. Somehow Ham felt Brother Hallwell's

work on this earth was unfinished. He could not say why he knew, or how, only that he did know.

He spoke from the side of his mouth to Doc Redfield. "Get our horses. Lead 'em south out of town. I'll meet you. Soon as I can."

"Wants to see this here chivaree," Doc protested.

"Ain't goin' to be no lynchin'," Ham said. "No tar and featherin'. Nothin'. Not today. You gets them horses and meets me like I say."

Reluctantly, Doc agreed. He turned away sullenly and headed toward the hitching rail, where their animals were tied. He cursed to himself. This Hammond was acting damned queer since his bout with brain fever. He had thought the boy cured. Now, he was less than certain. . . .

"Wait a minute," Ham shouted. He did not yell at the top of his voice. He did lower his tone a couple of octaves as he'd learned to do when a gang of slave blacks grew unruly. There was something in his voice that quieted the slaves. It quieted this mob. They recognized the voice of the most important citizen of the parish.

Lewis Gassaway waved his arm, smiling. "Come on up here, Hammond Maxwell. We welcomes you to head this here party. Meant all along for you to be right at the head of the parade."

"Ain't gonna be no parade." Ham pushed his way through the mob and leaped up upon the flatbed. He jerked his head, ordering the men to release the minister. They did so without question.

"What you say?" Lewis Gassaway stared at him.

"Just that. We ain't tarrin' an' featherin' this man fer comin' in here peaceful and havin' his say."

Lewis Gassaway stared at Ham as if he'd never seen him before. "This here's a nigger-lover, Ham. An abolitionist. Don't say you started believin' his filthy lies."

Ham shook his head. "Believes like you do. Like I always has. Ain't changed. Didn't say I believe what this here Hallwell is sayin', jes' that he got a right to his say."

Gassaway tried to laugh. "That's right. He's had his say. Now it our turn to send our message back up north to them other abolitionists. We write it in tar and feathers."

There was another roar of approval, but it was less vocal and total than before. None understood Ham Maxwell's change of heart, but they knew him and respected him. Whatever his reason, they accepted it.

"What's the matter with you?" Lewis demanded. "You don't want to take part, Ham, I suggest you git down off this wagon and gits out of here. We lets you go. Won't we, men?"

The shouts were even less hearty than before. Lewis Gassaway's red face went pallid. He stared at Ham, shaking his head. "Why you doing this? What you tryin' to prove?"

Ham shook his head. He motioned for Hallwell to get to his feet and onto the boot seat. Then Ham swung his arm, gesturing for the mob members to alight from the flatbed. They hesitated, but only briefly, looking at one another, at the crowd, at the cowering fat missionary, at Ham, and at Lewis Gassaway. They leaped down, puzzled, silent, frustrated.

"Less'n you wish to ride in this wagon with Reverend Hallwell and me all the way to Falconhurst, Lewis, I suggest you git down too."

"Damn you," Lewis said. "I won't forgit this, the way you actin' like a nigger-lover."

"Jes' don't say too much, Lewis," Ham advised in a low tone. "I got my reason for what I'm doing. I has decided that Brother Merrill Hallwell will be my guest out at Falconhurst." He gave the missionary a strange, faint smile. "I hope he will stay awhile."

Lewis leaped down from the wagon and stood peering up at his old friend. "A guest in your house? A rattlesnake abolitionist? A polecattin' nigger-lover?"

Ham shrugged. "He be my guest—until he has converted me. Or"—he laughed suddenly, nodding—"until I has converted him."

Part Two:

THE LONG JOURNEY

VI

Ham sweated. He had embarked on a long journey, would travel distantly, and he would not be denied.

His arduous journey began with that first step on the town square at Benson. He stood against his neighbors and friends and allies with the hated and dreaded abolitionist. He betrayed all he'd professed to believe his entire life. And, every day since then—every long painful day—he compounded this treason and fought back his own growing sense of frustration with his path, with his motives, and with his methods. But he would not change anything. He could not, though hatred crackled around him.

Tension bristled in that town square. One wrong word, one false step, would have set off the rioting of men already primed for vengeance.

Ham and the abolitionist moved unhurriedly, with Ham cautioning the fat man against haste or betrayal of fear. A mob was like a wild animal; it attacked the scent of fear as much as the smell of blood.

They mounted the boot of the flatbed wagon. Ham slapped the reins gently and the old horses trudged forward slowly. He was hardly aware that he was holding his breath until it burned painfully in his chest. Yells rose around them, protests, threats, and curses, but no one attacked. The mob let them go. . . . And so began Ham's long journey. . . .

Ham took Merrill Hallwell into his home at Falconhurst as an *honored* guest and, in doing so, denied aloud all the precepts and perceived truths and prejudices that he'd lived by and which had informed his existence to that moment.

It wasn't easy for him. He learned and practiced a discipline he'd never realized he was capable of. When Hallwell spoke of Negroes as God's children, "as human as you and me," Ham bit back the rage of long-held beliefs, and forced himself to smile, to swallow back the hot bile of frustration. He altered his entire personality. He wanted to convince Hallwell that he was one with the evangelist, that he shared the Quaker's convictions, championed his aims. Sometimes, after a session with the preacher, Ham was sick at his stomach, sometimes he longed to throttle the smiling stout man with his bare fists, but he held his counsel. He nodded and encouraged and flattered the missionary.

Hallwell underwent some changes too. From the first he had anxiously doubted Hammond Maxwell's intentions, his sincerity in his avowed wish to prevent that mob from tormenting and, perhaps, even killing the outsider. He could not believe he had discovered a friend in Babylon.

Hallwell held his breath on the eternal drive through the silent streets, where tension crackled in the hot, static atmosphere.

Outside the town limits, south of the Benson trace, they were joined by Dr. Redfield. The veterinarian awaited them silently and sourly in a copse of pines, concealed from the open roadway. The vet tied one of the horses to the tailgate of the wagon and rode the other on the trip through the sweated, silent forest to Falconhurst. They did arrive finally at the plantation, though, of course, Hallwell had no idea where the two men were taking him or what was to happen to him at their final destination. At this moment of his threatened existence, he trusted no one.

He recognized the doubt, bafflement, and cold hatred in the sun-seared face of the doctor. No one had to tell the preacher that Doc Redfield could not understand why Hammond Maxwell had opposed his friends and neighbors to preserve the carcass of a troublemaking abolitionist.

Doc went even further. He said aloud, careless that the preacher overheard him, "Don't know your reasons for doin' this foolhardy thing, Ham. . . . No way of me knowin' onless you decides to confide in me. . . . I can see you don't mean to do that . . . but I must express a word of caution to you

what might have slipped your mind in the insanity of what you're doin'. . . . Maybe you have your motives for steppin' in an' savin' the hide of this here Yankee nigger-lover. That may be all well and good. But there's this that I wonder has you put full consideration to. They's a good-more reason for tar and feathers for troublemakin' abolitionists. Tar and feathers for these fellers what come in here preachin' ag'in our way of life ain't only to discourage that fellow hisself. . . . Tar and feathers are our message to all them other Quakers and abolitionists that they can't come freely in here stirrin' up trouble. . . . I got to gell you. Today you sent a mighty strange message north to them rabble-rousers. As I say, if'n you got your good-more reason for your behavior, I for one would be mighty pleased to hear it."

Ham sweated, strangely chilled in the Saturday-afternoon heat. He felt both men staring at him, waiting for his answer. But he sagged in the boot of the wagon and said nothing. His plan was not yet clear in his own mind. All he knew for certain was that he suddenly aimed toward the most magnificent achievement of his life. A lifelong dream, an unyielding obsession, was going to be realized. He didn't know how yet. He knew only that he had done the right thing back there on the town square. He had started toward a goal that glowed ahead of him like some holy grail.

He had taken the first step.

The ailing Warren Maxwell found the Yankee guest to be a bird of weirdest plumage. Like Doc Redfield, when he first heard Merrill Hallwell discussing slavery and its evils, he thought it was some mistake, some huge jest. Hammond was engaged in some kind of youthful prank.

Warren tolerated Hallwell with courtesy for one reason only. The Yankee was a guest under his roof and the unspoken southern law required civility toward guests no matter the provocation or distaste.

Before the first week had played itself out, Warren did discover an interest in common with the evangelist. Hallwell could sit and put away hot toddies with him in even greater pleasure and camaraderie than Doc Redfield. This was a feather in the reverend's cap.

The preacher spent long afternoons drinking with Maxwell and talking with Hammond. No guest at Falconhurst was ever treated with greater courtesy and open-hearted hospitality than the missionary. It was only when Hallwell spoke of leaving, of "getting along down the road," of picking up the duties of his ministry, that Ham stopped smiling and turned a deaf ear to all his entreaties.

"Stay," was all Ham would say. "Nevah had a man like you at Falconhurst before. Stay. I can learn from you. I might be able to do a lot for you."

"They's a lot of poor, downtrodden blacks a-sufferin' —with nobody to speak for them whilst I loll in luxury here at your great estate, sir." Hallwell chewed on the fried chicken which Miz Lucretia Borgia had learned to keep within arm's reach for him and which he pronounced heavenly.

Ham urged another whiskey toddy on his guest and waved his arm negligently. "Maybe you can accomplish more—for your ministry—here with me," he said. He watched the abolitionist gulp down the fresh hot toddy that Mem served. Hallwell loved those toddies almost as devoutly as he treasured Miz Lucretia Borgia's fried chicken.

"Can't drink no alcohol," he had protested when he first arrived. "It's against my religion. . . . It's a sin, and against God's word."

"And I agree with you." Ham's oily smile almost matched that of the evangelist. "But heah at Falconhurst, suh, hot toddies is drunk, not in orgy, but for medicinal purposes. Against rheumatiz, against the cold, against the attack of illness."

Merrill Hallwell considered this briefly. "Medicinal, eh?" The fat lips grew moist, the mouth watered, drops forming at the corners. "Well, mayhap in that case—one glass—with only a touch of demon rum, mind you."

After he'd consumed that first glass, wiping at the foam on his whiskers with the back of his fat-fingered hand, Hallwell no longer protested. He even started secretly ordering the drinks from the younger servants when he believed himself unobserved by his hosts. He drank hot toddies all day long and had two of them placed beside his bed at night. "Helps me to rest," he said, and belched.

* * *

With some satisfaction Ham watched the preacher mellow and fall willing victim to the beguiling lures of the Falconhurst lifestyle. He spoke less and less of "getting on down the road." He drank more and more toddies, sprawled in a cane-bottomed rocking chair upon the gallery most of the morning and all afternoon. Often, after ten in the morning, when he spoke, even of God's work and God's vineyards, he slurred his words, grinned impishly, and belched helplessly.

Ham was pleased when Hallwell stopped preaching so incessantly about the evils of slavery, the damnation of trading in human beings, the injustice meted to blacks, the mistreatment of slaves and, especially, the equality of the races.

No matter how valiantly Ham fought to keep his ire and his bile under control, there was a lifetime of firmest credos being challenged every time Halwell opened his fat-lipped mouth. Ham did not deny that his beliefs were precisely those held by Lewis and Elijah Gassaway and all the other men who had meant to ride the abolitionist out of Benson on a rail, to fill his body full of grapeshot. No divergent convictions separated him from his most rabid neighbor. He was one with them—when he could afford to be.

He had to bite down hard on his underlip, swallow back hot vomitus, and force the most hypocritical of smiles when Hallwell began one of his lectures on freedom for slaves and equality for blacks in the South.

Ham stared at that oily, briar-eating smile of the evangelist, and he thought, "God almighty, I'm gettin' as two-faced as this mealy-mouthed bastard."

It had not taken long for him to ascertain a vital truth about Merrill Hallwell and that sacred ministry that made his own deception far easier for him. The minister had come south to preach abolition, but his driving motive was the monies he collected on the tambourines, and the pledges he conned from the misbegotten converts he made on his march through the South. Merrill Hallwell was in it first for the money. There was only the flimsiest veil between this truth and the prayers he mumbled almost mechanically for relief of the downtrodden black.

Ham waited almost two weeks before he broached the subject that had set him off on this strange quest that Saturday afternoon in Benson. He watched Hallwell closely. He had to convince Hallwell that despite the fact that he raised slaves for sale and that his father and his grandfather had engaged in this trade, in his heart he was reborn, set against the evil.

"I see you is right, Reverend," he heard himself saying. "Blacks is, after all, the same as you and me. Jus' as human as you an' me."

"Amen," Brother Hallwell said around the rim of his toddy glass.

Ham sighed excessively and smiled the smile he'd learned from the preacher. "But the question is, how can we make others—people like those men who rose against you in Benson that day—how can we make them see the truth?"

"God knows." Brother Hallwell shook his head. "All I know is that we got to keep workin' God's vineyards. We got to keep tryin'."

"Seems to me there ought to be some better way." Now Ham held his breath. This got delicate, putting into words for the first time the splendid thoughts which first had burned in his mind during Hallwell's "sermon" on the Benson square. "Didn't you once say something about bringin' a real African specimen of freed black man to this country to display?"

"Never be able to do that, sir." Hallwell belched into his heated glass.

"Maybe I could—pardon. Maybe you could. If you had my support—and the money I'd be willing to invest in your plan."

"What plan is that, sir?"

"To display a freed African. To show people how human and fine they are."

Hallwell took a long pull on his toddy and stared at Ham, his porcine eyes glittering. "You mean it, sir? You mean you'd help me make a dream of mine come true? Why, if I could bring from Africa a man who had never been shackled and humiliated in slavery, who had grown strong and virile in freedom, I'd have the most powerful of arguments against the evils of the slave trade."

"You speak my very words, Reverend." Ham gave him a replica of his own oily smile.

Hallwell shook his head, defeated and in despair before he began. "But we could never do it, sir."

"Why not?"

"Why, in the first place, it would cost a fortune."

Ham laughed. "I got plenty of money, Reverend." He sat forward in his chair, and spoke urgently. "I'd be willing to spend my money freely to procure the ideal African specimen for display and presenting around the country. . . . You'd get the huge crowds and the heavy contributions then, eh?"

Hallwell belched almost helplessly. He looked as if he would cry. "Beyond our wildest dreams, sir." He nodded emphatically. "Beyond our wildest dreams."

"But I don't think you've ever understood how serious I am. You don't see that I am wealthy enough to help you make your dream a reality. I am willing to pay our passage to Africa—you as my guest. Together we will find that perfect African—maybe a Mandingan—hardly any race on earth grows finer men than the Mandingoes of upper Senegal. . . . All you would have to do is to use the influence of your church to arrange a passport for such a black person. And we'd bring him back to America—back to the South if you wanted to."

Merrill Hallwell's pink face beamed. He sat staring into the distance. "That would be most generous of you."

"Not generous at all. If you are right, and folks can be shown what truly magnificent specimens these blacks are—I think you ought to be able to do it."

"Bless you, Brother."

Ham smiled, watching the evangelist closely. "Think of the crowds at your preachin's then—everywhere you'd go with this perfect black on exhibition. You might even teach him a few simple words of English. Let him speak words you'd teach him to say. . . . You'd have crowds then beyond your wildest hopes. And money. You'd take in money—for your cause, of course, like never before."

Hallwell shifted, troubled. "But an expensive trip—to Africa."

"At my expense, Reverend."

Hallwell stared at his young host, his deepset eyes moist.

"Why would you do such—such a magnanimous thing? You? A man who believes the way you do?"

"To show you—and everybody—that I am purentee converted—to God's true word."

"Bless you, Brother."

"Then you'd be willing to go?"

"Willing? Why, sir, I'd go eagerly—with a high heart full of hope."

Ham smiled. "That's the way I hoped you'd talk." He sent a young black servant boy running to the kitchen for fresh hot toddies. "To toast to our success," he said.

Merrill Hallwell belched politely and nodded. "We'd have to arrange that visitor's passport before we left the country."

"I'd leave that to you," Ham said. "Except any expense, of course. Whatever it costs to git that passport, I'm more'n willing to pay."

"Bless you, Brother." Reverend Hallwell looked ready to weep again. "Why, I reckon it was the best day of my life that day Saturday when you come to my aid in that benighted town."

Ham shrugged. "Folks just riled up. They good people mostly. Don't mean no harm. They just don't understand. But with a prime Mandingo specimen to display . . ." He smiled and nodded. "I believe you can make everybody understand."

"With God's help."

"That's right. We best make plans. We'll go from here to Charleston and before we sail you can make arrangements for the necessary entry papers for a legal black visitor."

"You'd be a great help. A well-known gentleman like you."

Ham shook his head. "I best kindly stay in the background. Better that I kindly be your silent partner—"

"In God's work."

"That's right. In God's work."

Merrill Hallwell spread his arms, beaming. "No need to be silent when you do God's work, Brother."

Ham stopped smiling. "Ain't the reason I'm planning to stay in the background and be silent. We want a visa for an African to come into this country. Be far better if'n you speak for us—if you do all the talking."

"We both can speak. Carry more weight."

Again, Ham shook his head, adamant. "Might be better that I say little. Nothin'. Don't even appear. I's a slave owner. Don't forget that. As a slave owner myself, I'm likely an onsavory character to many people who believe as you do—and who don't know me as you do."

Hallwell nodded, convinced. "I understand, Brother."

The black boy brought the toddies. When Hallwell took the glass from the slave, he smoothed the matted black cap of hair with his palm, as if in apology for adding to the burden of the youth's slavery.

Ham lifted his glass. "A toast. To us findin' a perfect Mandingan."

Merrill hoisted his toddy glass, smiling. "We drink a toast to our success. But I think too, Brother, we ought to pray—for God's guidance and God's success in our undertaking."

"I pray to that." Eagerly, Ham sank heavily to his knees on the porch flooring, his game leg extended awkwardly out at his side. "I say amen, Reverend. Amen."

VII

The Dutchman lived in a stilt house astride the loading docks at Dakar. His abode overlooked the harbor. From it, the Dutchman saw everything. He knew everything. He believed his home to be the pulse and heart of the Slave Coast trade in black flesh.

His name—long forgotten by all but legal users—was Pieter Cloete Van Horne. But he was known as "the Dutchman" along the Slave Coast and all the way south to the Cape. Not only his nationality gave him his sobriquet. He looked as if he might have stepped, whining and complaining, from a Van Dyck original.

He came out of his thatch-roofed hut, a huge, barrel-chested man in impeccably pressed whites already sweated and stained in the earliest morning humidity. His muscled body, which he'd believed would never grow old, was aging, chest hairs matted gray, paps sagging like an old woman's tits. He had grown to hate his body, as he was contemptous of anything weak or failing. A man had to be strong to stay alive in this world.

He stared sourly out at the *Southern Sea*. The rust-streaked freighter, east from Charleston, South Carolina, had dropped anchor in the port off the Verde Peninsula sometime during the night. It rocked gently on the still bay waters, touched by sunlight.

Moving slowly in the debilitating heat of seven A.M., the Dutchman walked with purpose to a ladder over the side of the pier. He climbed down it to a waiting skiff handled by two bared young Negro boys who wore only loincloths. He

settled himself amidships, gripping each side of the canoe to steady against its rocking motion and jerked his head toward the *Southern Sea*. The two boys began to row in that direction, wordlessly.

The boys maneuvered the skiff to the port side of the freighter, where rope ladders had been lowered at ten-foot intervals like nets from the first deck railing. The Dutchman sneered, always amused by the greed of the slave traders. A big day for the freighter. The *Southern Sea* was loading its cargo for the return voyage before it even unloaded its freight assigned to Dakar. He knew why. Arrangements for loading blacks in the harbor had to be handled with delicate diplomacy. The British had outlawed slave trading on the high seas. Their port people would close their eyes for only so many hours and for so much in cash. The loading had to be accomplished on a schedule. He shrugged. He didn't give a damn what the fool captain and the hypocritical British Admiralty did. It was their business, and a profitable one at that, but living in such speed and tension could mean falling victim to sunstroke. The hell with them. He preferred more direct dealing. He had found the openly venal and he dealt with them, at his leisure. Running an expensive cargo from British gunboats was not his idea of good business or even of common sense. There were better ways, and the Dutchman always found them.

Painfully, fighting every recognized law of gravity, the Dutchman clambered and swayed up one of the rope ladders. He came out on the deck above, puffing, sweated, breathless, and cursing. He was getting too old for this business of clambering about boat decks like a capuchin monkey. He reminded himself to set out new demands for his clients. From now on they would come to him, in the quiet comfort of his fan-cooled living room, or they wouldn't do business with him at all.

He inquired from the Officer of the Deck for the Americans, Maxwell and Hallwell. A nattily attired steward saluted and motioned him to follow aft.

The Dutchman hadn't known what to expect—all Americans were strange ducks in his book—but he had never seen a less

likely duo than the sun-leathered young Maxwell and the middle-aged, doughy-soft Yankee.

The Dutchman dispensed with formalities and pleasantries and inquiries about their crossing as quickly as possible. It was too hot for the amenities. Too much courtesy was a waste of time and money. And, frankly, he didn't give a damn to hear about the travails of ocean passage on brigantines. He peered at the Americans, squinting against the sun. "You the fellows wrote to me about helping you locate a fancy specimen black?"

"A perfect black, suh," Maxwell said. "We're heah lookin' for the finest African alive. . . . They told us you could help us."

The Dutchman shrugged. "I can help you find anything you want, sir. As long as the price is right."

Ham Maxwell nodded. "Price is no object. We'll pay your fee—no questions—if you find us the man we want."

"That's the sort of bargain I favor," the Dutchman said. "You can consider it done, sir."

A moaning sound, like cries of a thousand mourning doves amplified a hundred times, swept up from the bay and across the deck.

"What is that?" Hallwell cried out. He ran to the railing and stared over the side. From the distant mouth of the harbor, from those strange, swift-running marigots encircling river islands, came a procession of canoes unlike anything Hallwell had ever seen before.

The Dutchman stopped talking, watching the approach of the canoes. Beyond that wailing, moiling maelstrom of canoes, Ham saw low flat strips of green trees that seemed to grow out of the black water on spidery roots. Between these aits, narrow slits showed swift-rushing channels, where the last of the canoes fought churning tides just to remain afloat. Past the tops of these trees he saw white towers, minarets and tops of sun-splashed buildings of the harbor. His gaze came back to the long procession of identical dugout canoes, manned by solemn blacks and loaded with other Negroes in arm chains and leg shackles.

As the first canoes glided in close to the ship, the vessel reared above them like a high black wall. Though whips

cracked, the moaning continued, subdued but unabated, an aching sound of mortal fear and terror of the unknown and of heartbreak.

Even the Dutchman winced at the odor rising from those boats, a smell of sorrow, hopelessness, and putrid latrines. It was a complex stench of old sweat and human excrement, of unyielding horror, an odor so overwhelming it was like pollution infesting the whole harbor. One could not even draw a clean breath of air. The Dutchman cursed. No matter how long you stayed here, you never got used to that stink of terror.

The first of the canoes drew alongside the ship, where the rope ladders had been lowered down the sheer wooden wall. These rope nets dangled to the waterline. The crewmen caught the lines to steady their crafts. They ordered the slaves to grab the nets and hoist themselves up. This would have required agility of men with free limbs. The blacks could barely move with shackled ankles and chained wrists, but the crewmen sped them along with curses and cracking of rawhide whips.

One young black was afraid of the huge ship, the likes of which he'd never seen or dreamed in his wildest, deep-jungle nightmare, afraid of the deep water, the dangling rope nets. When the guard told him to climb, he tried to move, but fell to his knees, almost upsetting the canoe. His wits addled, he no longer even understood the commands from his captors. The order was repeated and this time the end of the whip snapped savagely at his cheek, tearing the flesh so blood spurted. The poor devil screamed, now totally unmanned. The guard whipped and kicked him without mercy until the boy writhed upward and slipped over the side. He caught at the netting and tried to pull himself up though he sobbed in terror, blinded by his own helpless tears. He made it out of the boat, beyond the reach of the lash, but then, hanging to the ropes, he froze, unable to move up or down. The other slaves moved awkwardly around him, climbing upward. The guards cursed and struck at him with their whips. The boy whined helplessly. Suddenly, he let go of the netting ropes. He fell wildly, striking his head against the canoe bracing. He landed in the water between ship and boat, carried beneath the surface by the weight of his chains and iron shackles. The

guards glanced toward where he'd disappeared in a widening circle of the water and then they shrugged, forgetting him. A dead slave was worth nothing to anybody. The crabs would feast on him and grow fat for the café cookpots.

Ham left the Dutchman and walked down to where Hallwell had propped himself against the railing. The evangelist, his face ashen, made a place for him and Ham leaned over the barrier. He watched the welter of dugouts jockey for position alongside the netting. Black men, naked except for flimsy, soaking wet loincloths which outlined rather than concealed their prodigious privates, balanced themselves at each end of the crafts in which were bound frightened and battered bush blacks newly transported from upriver. The crewmen, the Dutchman told them, were the freed blacks of the Slave Coast. Because of their prowess on the water and skilled, unconcerned handling of their miserable human cargoes, they were invaluable to the white traders.

"Slaves," Hallwell whispered to Ham, ill. "Captured men to be sent to America on this ship. This so-called honest freighter which we lived aboard on the route east, suddenly is carrying cargoes of suffering blacks amidships on their return. . . . Name of God. Name of God."

"Not everybody feels about the slave trade as you do," Ham told him.

Hallwell seemed not to hear him, horrified and fascinated by the sight of the blacks, secured like captured animals, below him.

"This is the handiwork of a bastardly Egyptian trader named Ibrahim," the Dutchhman said at Ham's elbow. "We can deal with Ibrahim, if you like. Whether I like it or not, I have to deal with this bastard trader." He laughed. "I'm middleman for a lot of bastards, I can tell you. Few the equal of Ibrahim. This fellow is the oiliest, slipperiest, slimiest bastard of them all. But he does bring in the slaves. As ordered. Others go upriver and fail. But Ibrahim never does. Only reason I deal with him is that we can fill our quotas with his collection of strays without having to deal with abler hunters and pay higher prices. Sometimes the price forms our friendships, eh?" He put his head back, laughing.

"It's inhuman," Hallwell whispered.

"The man behind it is inhuman, mate," the Dutchman agreed. "But he gets the slaves down here for us. And he gets them here in time to sail. We get them cheaper from him. He's cruel, but reasonable in price, eh? We get a lot of culls from Ibrahim, I admit. But that's the chance one takes when one runs contraband. Eh? And they lose a high percentage of the blacks at sea." He shrugged. "But once they're aboard one of these here schooners, they're no longer any skin off our arses, eh? Burial at sea. Quick. Clean. Easy. One might hate to deal with fly-by-nighters like this Ibrahim, but don't want him double-crossin' us with the British. Have to throw some business his way despite the damn poor lot we usually get from him. Look at these poor devils. Bush niggers all. It's the Fans, the Jaloffs, the Hausas that bring in the real money these days. But how you goin' to get high quality when most of them smarter tribes are deep in the slave trade their own selves?" He laughed. "It's a puzzlement . . . I tell you, Mandingoes and the Sudanese are the top of the lot. But cost you a fortune. You lose a few of *them* in mid-passage, and then face trouble or blackmail at the blockades outside Cuba and in the Gulf of Mexico, losses get so high, they're intolerable. It ain't worth it. So mostly, we deal with Ibrahim. Stick to the bush blacks, even the flat-faced Yorubas. . . ." He watched the floundering slaves struggle upward on the side of the ship in taut silence for some moments. "Just once in a while, though, I wish Mr. Ibrahim would surprise us with a few prime specimens. Just enough to keep it profitable for us, eh? But he never does. He brings us culls. But like I say, he delivers on time."

Hallwell straightened, watching as the blacks were whipped from the canoes and forced up the ladder to board the slave ship.

"Look at that trashy lot." The Dutchman clapped Hallwell on the back. "You may not be able to tell an Ibo from a pigmy, but you can see I ain't gettin' no strong, healthy-looking bucks for my clients in this shipment. He'll be lucky to get three hundred for them—them that live to see Havana. Damn, I'd like to see some pretty wenches in a caffle. Prices are getting better on them black wenches all the time as white

men in the South and the West Indies islands develop more and more taste for nigger wenches as bedmates.''

Hallwell straightened, his cheeks pallid. He looked as if he'd suffered a seizure of some kind. He tried to speak, could not, and then abruptly he buckled foward, his mouth stretched wide as he vomited.

The Dutchman yelled with laughter. ''Look out below,'' he bellowed. He slapped Hallwell on the shoulder. ''Don't fret it none, mate, them poor bastards'll be swimmin' in their own puke before they get good out to sea.''

''My God,'' Hallwell gasped. ''Name of God. This has got to be stopped.''

''What's wrong with him?'' The Dutchman demanded, staring coldly at Ham across the evangelist's head.

Ham tried to smile. ''Oh. He drank something that upset him. That's all. Drank too early in the morning. His stomach can't take it. The heat and all.''

''Jesus. How uncivilized.'' The Dutchman put his head back, laughing.

Hallwell gripped the rail, weeping. Ham caught his arm roughly. ''Be a man, for God's sake. No sense carrying on like this . . . Nothing you can do.'' Though he pitied the evangelist, he had to bite back the searing words that sprang to his lips. ''Anyway. It don't matter. They ain't human.''

He thought it, but managed to stop himself before he said it.

VIII

The Dutchman held a teenaged black girl across his legs, her arms wrapped tightly about his neck. She writhed, moaning and kissing him fiercely. Her sack skirt was knotted about her supple waist. Ham and the Reverend Hallwell came into the shadowed living room of the Dutchman's stilt house about three in the afternoon. After a prolonged moment of crackling tensions, the Dutchman became aware of them standing inside the doorway. Flat fans moved back and forth against the ceiling. The room was crowded with cane and wicker furniture, odds and ends gathered over the years. At the moment, the Dutchman was poised in wingback reed chair, his face flushed and his round eyes bugging from their sockets.

At last he pushed the girl back roughly. She stood up but her sheath skirt remained tied about her waist. She glanced at the visitors disinterestedly and unselfconsciously. Hallwell, still squeamish and sick-bellied after the evil he'd witnessed aboard the *Southern Sea,* looked away, disturbed and uncomfortable.

Ham peered at the girl with the practised eye of the connoisseur, the professional slave trader. He found nothing discomfiting about the situation, except that he had never seen a white man kissing a black wench before. This shocked him faintly.

He let his gaze trail across the flat planes of her trim caramel-colored belly, the slight rise of dark hair at the triangle of her femininity, the sleek and shapely thighs, calves, and ankles.

The Dutchman laughed, straightening his clothes and but-

toning his fly. He shook his head, continually amazed by the uncivilized actions of the Americans. "What the devil you two fellers doin' abroad at this hour? This is siesta time. Too hot for anything but some quiet dog-fashion or spraddle-legged fucking. People here in Dakar don't transact any business this time of the day."

"We are rather eager to get on with our search," Ham said, smiling in apology. "Pardon this intrusion."

The Dutchman shrugged. He flicked the girl's skirt down over her legs and pushed her away. "Get whiskey for our guests, Leenie," he told her, "and learn to put your skirts down when we got company. No tellin' when we might get some religious fanatic in here, seeing sin behind every hard-on. Eh?" He threw his head back, laughing. He gestured toward the wench, who slithered from sunpatch to shadow, crossing the room. "Leenie's mighty proud of that little pretty down there."

"And well she ought to be," Ham said with a smile. "She's a fine-lookin' little hussy."

The Dutchman gestured with his hand. "I keep only the primest of the prime. And them only as long as they're prime. They're too plentiful to keep second-rate stuff." He seemed to consider something for a long beat, then he regarded Ham narrowly. "Is Leenie what you're looking for?"

Ham shook his head. "No. I told you."

The Dutchman laughed. "Hell, I know what you told me. But a man's allowed to change his mind. I've seen a man's hard change his mind more times than I can tell you. She's prime. And young. Hardly used—except by an old Dutchman with a softening prick." He roared with laughter.

"We're looking for a man," Hallwell said. "A prime specimen of a man."

"Sure you are. But a man's a hell of a lot more trouble, Mr. Hallwell. A hell of a lot more trouble. And not nearly so much fun . . . Unless, of course, unless your tastes run counterclockwise, as we say. In that case, my apology, sir, and no offense intended."

"No offense taken," Hallwell said. He sounded sincere if slightly prim. "It's just that we've talked a lot since we met you aboard ship this morning."

"Talked about me, eh? Well, I'm flattered."

Hallwell winced. "It's just that we're not sure, Mr. Dutchman, that you are the man to help us in our quest, after all."

The Dutchman stood up, stretching his shoulders and arms, breathing deeply into his keglike chest. "And why not? You'll find no better, I can assure you in all modesty. I'm as honest as any other man. No more, but no less. And more importantly for you fellers, I'm the leading flesh broker on the Slave Coast. I know all the traders, all the hunters, and all the buyers who come sneaking in here with their secret pacts with freighters. Whatever goes on, I know about it, as it's happening. Sometimes before. I am at the center of this profitable trade, sir. No matter who you dealt with, likely he'd deal through me before your little transaction was completed."

"Those blacks we saw being boarded were not what we are looking for at all," Hallwell said, his voice weak but determined.

"That's the truth," Ham said. "You admitted you brokered those culls we saw boarded onto the *Southern Sea*." He sighed and shook his head. "I got every respect for your experience and knowledge of this business."

"Then what's your complaint?"

"Bush niggers. Not what we're looking for," Ham said.

"Holy God, man." The Dutchman stared at Ham. "That was a special case. I knew when I bought from Ibrahim, I'd get culls. That was not the question. There was just one question today. Could Ibrahim deliver his blacks in the armistice-time granted the buyer by the British? They had to be loaded fast and that ship had to clear harbor in a certain time limit. A time limit, by the way, set by the British themselves. Once the gunboats slid into harbor, there was no way out. The ship would be stopped and it would be searched, no matter how much was paid into greedy hands under the table over at the Admiralty. That was understood by all, all except you two, evidently. I told you this was just a run-of-the-mill sale of blacks. Ship schedule was as important as the cargo. And I dealt with Ibrahim for the buyers because Ibrahim could deliver. And, by God, he did deliver—in the scheduled loading time. No trouble with the British. No sign of them

interdicting gunboats. No problems. Smooth as a cat's ass. What more of a mortal man can you ask than I delivered?''

Ham nodded. ''Still. We want to impress on you. We don't want to waste time. Blacks like those we saw today are not what we want. Nothing like what we want.''

''Amen,'' said Brother Merrill.

The Dutchman spread his hands. ''Granted. Hell, I understood that. Minute I talked with you. I knew we weren't talking about Ibrahim's culls.''

''Just so you understand.''

''I do! Hell, I do. Why don't we start off on the right foot, gentlemen? You tell me what you *do* want. And I'll tell you what it'll cost you.''

Hallwell said, ''We want nothing like that caffle we saw down at that ship today.''

The Dutchman nodded. ''Then you won't get nothing like that. But, I warn you. Don't try to figure slave-trading in advance. And don't underestimate Ibrahim any more than you underrate yours truly. . . . Ibrahim the Egyptian deals in bush niggers. But he takes special assignments too.''

''We won't deal with him,'' Hallwell said. ''Not even through you.''

The Dutchman gave Hallwell a glance which ill-concealed the contempt he felt for the fat man. He could have done business with the Southerner. Here was a man who knew what he was talking about, knew black flesh. You couldn't fool the Dutchman. If you were a fake, he smelled that first. If you didn't know what you were talking about—he gazed at you as he looked now at Brother Merrill.

''All right,'' the Dutchman said. ''So we don't deal with Ibrahim. That leaves a hell of a lot of hunters to work with. But whether they are better or worse than Ibrahim, I can't say. I make no case for Ibrahim. I don't give a fuck who you deal with. It's just that Ibrahim can get you the buck you want. No questions asked. None answered. For a price, he'll deliver you the primest, fanciest black you ever laid your eyes on. The Egyptian bastard. He's crooked, but he knows black flesh. That's my only point, and we'll talk no more of Ibrahim.''

"I don't want to deal with any of these slave hunters," Ham said.

The Dutchman's brows went up. "And do you mind saying why not?"

Ham nodded. He limped between the slanted parallelograms of distorted sunlight on the rag-carpeted wooden flooring. "I can tell you. I want quality them hunters can't deliver. I want to see and select—"

"That can get mighty damned expensive and time-consuming."

"It's what I want. I'll take that and nothing else."

"It can almost prove as dangerous as wadin' bare-assed among crocodiles," the Dutchman warned. "That's wild country upriver."

"I don't ask that it be easy. I ask that I get what I want," Ham said.

"You got your mind made up on that, have you?"

Ham nodded. "I have. I want a Mandingo. That's my first choice. That's my last choice."

"God's blood. Let's not part before I advise you on something that may save you money, may even save your skins. Look! I'll be brief. This here is a bloody cove in a bloody part of the world. You can find here the best slave hunters in Africa. You can also find slave dealers who'll cut your throat for a hundred guineas. Caravans come in here all the time. What you do if you are smart, as I hope you are, is you'll be patient, trust me, and when them caravans come in, you'll look them over. I've seen caffles containing the finest specimens—Hausas, Mandingoes, Jaloffs, Senegalese, Somalis. I've even seen a few Sudanese. Ah, the Sudanese male is something grand to see. And there's what you want if you want the best. A Sudanese buck. Make your mouth water to look at him. To find them you need expert advice and help. That's what I offer you. Slaves I have brokered have brought the highest prices in Cuba, Barbados, Haiti and, yes, in the prohibited United States. I deal in cheap culls like Yorubas, Soosoos, Dahomeys, Ibos, or even the riffraff of plundered villages along the coast. But only because that's where the fast turnover, the quick profit, is made. But I can get you the best."

"A Mandingo," Ham said stubbornly. "I have come all the way to Africa to find and take back the most perfect Mandingo that can be had."

The Dutchman laughed. "You want the Mansa Cheikh Obed. . . . Too bad you can't have him."

IX

Cheikh Obed. . . .

Ham could never say why, but from the moment he heard that name, he was entranced, fascinated, obsessed. When the Dutchman spoke the name of that unknown Mandingo, Ham felt hackles crimp along the nape of his neck. He had to find *this* Mandingo. He respected the Dutchman's knowledge, of blacks and of slave trading. Instinctively, he understood. The Dutchman had spoken the name of the perfect Mandingan. Nobody could say why. Maybe just to whet the buyers' appetites, maybe to taunt them. Whatever the motive, the slaver had set that name and that image in Ham's mind. No longer would an "ideal" Mandingan satisfy him. It was as if now that he'd found virtue, he wanted something better.

The Dutchman went on talking loudly and forcefully. He talked about the blacks and their qualities. Ham scarcely listened. He wanted to go, without delay, to the place where he might find this Cheikh Obed. Perhaps the Dutchman had not lied. Maybe there was some reason why he could never have this most perfect of black men, but at least he had to *see* him. Nothing else would satisfy him.

He found the Dutchman watching him with a faintly sour smile twisting his mustached mouth. The slaver appeared to read his mind, his thoughts, as they moiled in his brain. Perhaps it was nothing more than instinct, honed over years of dealing with slaves, slave hunters, and slave buyers. The Dutchman noticed that Maxwell was no longer listening to his monologue and let his voice trail off. He peered at Ham with tilted brow. "And what's eatin' at your arse, Mr. Maxwell?"

Ham sighed. "Where is this perfect Mandingan you spoke of?"

The Dutchman laughed as if Ham were a fish hooked and wriggling at the end of a line. "Whetted your lusty appetites, have I? Well, get that name out of your mind, and let's talk common sense."

"Cheikh Obed." Ham let the name roll on his tongue. "Why should I forget him if he's what I've come so far to find?"

The Dutchman waved his arm in a deprecating way. "Because you are wasting your own time. And mine. Obed is the king of a tribe upriver. His own kingdom. He deals himself in slaves—warriors captured when they attack his village. And he's got his woes. His kingdom ain't the most peaceful garden spot on this earth. No, he's got woes. There are the warlike ones in his tribe who say he goes too easy against his enemies. Then the other side what says he's too warlike. As usual, the truth is in the middle there somewhere. Obed's a big man. Physically, I mean. If you saw him, you'd feel the kind of awe that might come over you at first glance of some really elegant Greek sculpture. But for all his strength and bigness, he's beset with troubles. As we all are. Only he's a giant and his troubles are giant-sized. Like I say, there are factions in his tribe at work secretly to overthrow him, and enemies poised from without waiting to plunder and burn his lands and huts. He's got his big hands full. And I can tell you, he has no time and no stomach for wasting hours being stared at by outsiders, the likes of you."

Ham's voice remained firm. "Still, I'd like to see him."

The Dutchman shook his head as if tried beyond his patience. "Damn it, man, I tell you. He won't see you. Likely, he won't even let you put in your boat at his landings without a fight. He's mighty jealous of his privacy. He hates strangers. And most of all, he's learned to hate and mistrust strangers with white faces."

"Ignorant natives are often like that," Ham allowed.

The Dutchman scowled and peered at Ham in new contempt. "Ignorant native, eh? Well, so that's where you come from, is it? Well, we'll talk no more about it. You can get Mansa Cheikh Obed out of your mind, so we can get down to

serious and profitable business. I endure your kind in the hope of making a dollar.''

''Why should I not even want to see this Mandingan?'' Ham's tone matched the Dutchman's. They sweated. They appeared to have forgotten the presence of the missionary.

''I'll tell you why. Because you're wasting time. His. Yours. Mine. Because I hate to waste my time. Mansa means ''king'' in Senegalese—in his Mandingan dialect. King. Don't you understand? Or don't you want to understand? King Obed is not your ordinary bush ruler. He's a true king, with maybe twenty generations of Senegalese royalty behind him. Educated. He believes his people truly need him. Why would he give a shit about entertaining a couple of stupid white Americans like you?''

''Because I'm willing to pay you whatever it would cost you to arrange a visit up there.'' Ham was in no way discouraged by anything the Dutchman said. In fact, his desire mounted. His heart beat faster, his mind burned with images of the black man he might find upriver. There was no longer any lingering doubt in his mind about this long journey. He knew why he had come so far, endured so much. ''If I paid your price,'' he said, ''would you guide us upriver to his kingdom?''

The Dutchman sweated in frustration. ''You take your life in your hands, man. I told you. Don't you understand that?''

Ham remained unmoved. ''Ain't what I asked you. How much would you charge to lead us up there where I could see and talk to this Mansa Obed?''

The Dutchman shook his head. He got up and paced the room. He paused and stared through a braced window to the sunlit bay beyond. He turned at last, speaking as one might to a badly retarded individual. ''If I lead you up there, Mr. Maxwell, likely I'd be leading you to your death from a poison dart.''

''You can send word ahead. I know you can do that. You can let him know we come in peace.''

The Dutchman swung his arm, standing with the sun a brilliant haze behind him. ''Jesus, man. You think the Mansa Obed ain't heard that bullshit before? Come in peace. Jesus H. Christ. Every white man goes upriver in peace—until he

sees what he wants to grab—flesh, metal, hides, diamonds, or ivory; suddenly it ain't so friendly and peaceful anymore." He laughed in a cold way. "But let's say you two is different. You go in peace. Well, you can go upriver in peace—but whether Mansa Obed accepts you peacefully is another matter."

Ham continued to stare at the man with the sun behind him. "How much?" he persisted.

The Dutchman laughed, and named a figure he expected would end the matter once and for all. "A thousand dollars American. A day," The Dutchman said.

"A thousand? A day?" Merrill Hallwell spoke now, his voice choked with disbelief.

"Aye." The Dutchman nodded emphatically. "And you'd hold that price dirt cheap once you saw this black king—if you got to see him. But, remember this first above all, gentlemen, you pay me—one thousand American a day—for taking you up there. That's all my responsibility. Hopefully, you get a glimpse of the mansa. Hopefully. And not a spear in your fat asses. The mansa's a touchy bastard. Especially about strangers in his territory. I've heard he's gone crazy when faced by white outsiders."

"I'll pay your price," was all Ham said. They heard Hallwell exhale heavily in the overheated room.

The Dutchman nodded. "All right. So you insist on going. And all of a sudden I'm sick of you both, and I want you to go. But mark well, my pay is for taking you up there, and has nothing to do with your talking to him or your crazy scheme of taking him back to America with you. Even if I could, I wouldn't guarantee a thing like that. I'm as honest a thief as you'll find on the peninsula. I'd come nearer guaranteeing that you can't even step foot ashore in his kingdom—and live to tell it."

Hallwell stepped forward from the shadows. "I don't know what kind of things you suggest, sir. But I want it understood. There is to be no violence. No violence. That must be understood before we start upriver."

The Dutchman laughed. "That's up to you and your hard-headed partner here, Mr. Hallwell. . . . Me, I'm a peace-lovin' man. Won't be no violence on my part. . . . But I got to warn you. It may all get violent—the minute we enter

Mansa Obed's territory. Violence that may well come from his army."

"No." Hallwell shook his head. "No violence."

Ham bit back the rage that gorged up from his belly at the mealy-mouthed tone of the evangelist's voice.

Ham mopped his brow with his bandanna. He was tired of Merrill Hallwell by now, sick and tired of him. He had endured enough, too much. Hallwell never stopped talking and his monologues were always the same, the mistreatment of slaves, the equality of blacks, the cruel injustices of the whites.

Ham swallowed at the taste of gall that welled into this throat at this latest interference from the abolitionist. All the way across the Atlantic, Hallwell had laid out new rules, new limits, new regulations about their relationship with their proposed black guest. He must be treated as an equal in all things. He must be shown every courtesy and kindness. He must be made to understand that Hallwell, Hammond Maxwell, and Hallwell's organization supported and defended him against all outsiders. He must accompany them as a true guest in every sense of the word. Hallwell could not in good conscience be involved in any other sort of arrangement.

Ham sweated, frustrated. He'd agreed to all Hallwell's newly invented terms as the evangelist invented them. He had kept his anger in tow, modulated his voice, concealed his growing hatred.

It had been a long sea voyage. Life at sea is unlike that anywhere else. The living space is small, compact, inescapable. If men start on a sea voyage in hatred, they can soon come to murderous confrontation in passage. Lifelong friendships are begun and cemented aboard a ship, as well as blood hatreds.

Ham had to remind himself a thousand times a day that this unnatural situation would end. He would escape the cloying atmosphere in which Hallwell passed the days of his life. Meantime, for all those thousand miles he had fought back his frustrations and rages. He smiled at the preacher when he longed to throttle him. He needed Hallwell. The missionary believed he was being afforded Maxwell's wealth, influence, and support.

The only times he'd escaped Hallwell's platitudes and addled logic was when Hallwell was drinking or promenading the decks. Hallwell had spent most of the days drinking hot toddies which he taught the ship's stewards to prepare for him. Drinking, Hallwell talked even more than ordinarily. He talked incessantly of his evangelical calling, his working in God's vineyards. "Oh, I faced danger many times, Mr. Maxwell. Many times, I can tell you. That lynch mob in Benson was not the first I'd faced, I assure you. I guess I always escaped death for only one reason."

"Eh?" Ham had forced himself to respond. "What was that?"

"Why, because I had God's protection. I always had God's protection. Oh, I'm sure that you believe you came to my aid solely from the goodness of your heart. But I believe in broader motives. I look for God's reasons. Why were you there at that precise moment? Why did you come to my aid? I'll tell you why, Brother . . . because God sent you."

Ham had exhaled sourly, but said nothing. He'd stared out at the changeless sea and hoped his raging temper would not betray him.

Now he carefully bit back his anger. This was no time to upset the slowly built trust he'd created between them. He needed Hallwell now maybe more than ever. Still, with his quest in sight, Hallwell was like shackles on his legs. He forced a smile. "Nobody has spoken of violence, Reverend. Not on our part."

The Dutchman laughed. "No. That's right. Not on our part. Still, I feel duty-bound to warn you, them tribes upriver are warlike. They've learned well to mistrust white incursions, white faces, and white promises. Nowadays they most often shoot first and parley later—if ever. That's the fact I'm trying to make clear as you chatter about peace."

"Still," Ham kept his voice level. "We can send word ahead. Gifts—"

"My God, man. Don't you see what I'm telling you? Gifts ahead. That's what every lying white plunderer has done for hundreds of years. Promises and gifts. No. If you're going, you go quiet. You promise nobody nothing. If they begin to shoot their darts at you, you turn tail and run."

"When can we start?" Ham said.

The Dutchman laughed. "Not a man to take counsel of wiser heads, are you, Mr. Maxwell? I can tell you. It'll take at least a week to make plans, get papers in order, make pacts with the river tribes whose lands we cross. Yes, at least a week. But don't worry. You got a lot to do your own selves. First, in the matter of your clothes. Those things you're wearing are too hot for this climate. And it gets hotter upriver. I'll take you to a shop and you'll get white outfits. White men wear white linen because most are the high-and-mightiest snobs you'll ever meet, but anything heavier will give you heat rash until you'll think your balls are scalded. We'll get you outfitted in white linen, cotton shirts, and sandals. A few days in the sun, you'll look like the Afrikaners. . . . But whether that's going to help you get close enough for a good look at Mansa Obed's bucks is another question. A whole nother question entire, and I got no easy answer for that. . . ."

X

The strangely shaped boats, partially roofed with striped, fringed fabric, fought their way upriver. The crafts were flat-bottomed, but narrow like canoes at each end and almost twenty feet long, with places for six oarsmen. As they boarded at the docks, the Dutchman laughed and waved his arm. "These fellows are upriver cannibals," he said. "At least they're cannibals when left to their own devices."

"Cannibals." Merrill Hallwell hesitated on the edge of the wooden pier.

"Don't worry, Mr. Hallwell," the Dutchman said. "The sight of my pistol can control them easily."

The oarsmen were big men, glistening with palm oil, their muscles rippling as they rowed. They did not partake of the white man's viands. They had brought along rotted eland meat which stunk with the fury of hell during the hot hours of daylight.

They rowed upriver, making portages at three huge waterfalls over the next eight days. They all climbed then, the crew with the boats resting on their heads, moving upward in a strange muteness. Back in the water at last, they rowed in that same bristing uncommunicativeness, silent but as if they were about to erupt in insane banshee wails. Only they didn't. They said nothing, not even to one another. They simply rowed, hour after hour, without rest, without the hope of rest. They were young and strong but they were beaten, without will. It was the only way they had learned to adapt to the white man and his ways.

The boat glided upriver, against the currents, going eter-

nally around great bends, river islands, and matted swamps. Trees, massive and matted with vines, rose up from the waterline, shutting out the sun.

Hallwell grew more morose and indrawn as they penetrated deeper upstream into the dark and forbidding jungle. The stillness was oppressive and threatening, a part of existence unchanged since the primeval dawn, and it was not a reassuring quiet. There were no signs of life, and yet the dark forest teemed with life, with unseen eyes, watching and vengeful. "We should have stayed in Dakar," Hallwell said a dozen times. "We should have followed the Dutchman's advice and let them bring the black men down to us."

Ham shrugged and said nothing. He ignored the preacher as much as he could. He was not fool enough to pretend he enjoyed this ever-present threat of the unknown and unknowable, the thought that around the next bend there would rise a rage of voices, a turmoil of howling and leaping black bodies, painted faces and eyes roiling with hatred, but he accepted this as part of the price of this search. And though they stayed alert, night and day, even the Dutchman sitting with his hand resting on the butt of his handgun, the hostiles did not show. This did not mean they were not out there. Their presence was as real as the humid stench from the soured eddies, but if they were crouched in the heavy concealment, it was as if they waited for something, a sign, a signal, an unspoken command.

The passengers crouched on the bottom of the boat, watching the water ahead, the forests looming above them. The oarsmen worked in silence, glistening with sweat and palm oil. The current raged against them, almost mocking their efforts.

The black tiller was the man with the impossible chore. He had to find, mostly by instinct, the jutting of hidden banks, the concealed faces of submerged stones, of tree trunks lurking under the surface of the black water.

Sometimes the current was so fiercely rapid that the rowers could make no progress against it. As hard as they worked, the boat seemed only to stand still. Then began the slow, painful process of rowing back and forth across the stream until finally the currents released the boats, like a cat tired of toying with its victims.

Ham asked often how much farther the Dutchman figured to the Mandingo capital. The Dutchman had one answer for him: "Eight days."

The answer never varied, no matter how long they had been navigating the vast river. Finally, Ham stopped asking. He wondered if even the Dutchman himself knew how long the river voyage would take. It was a matter of one slow day at a time. Ham found each day to be different, as if they entered uncharted lands, unknown territory, where time was lost and mileages unmarked, where no one had gone before. He knew better. This river was a highway of commerce, traveled constantly. Despite the men who came into it, the land never changed, and yet it was never the same, from one day to the next, from one caravan to the next.

When the boat approached another falls, the rapids churning white, the crew put in to shore. They pulled the boats from the water, balanced them on their heads, and began to climb silently to the head of the falls almost lost in the misty uplands. They plodded wordlessly and the Dutchman trailed them, as silent and withdrawn, his handgun carried carelessly at his side. Hallwell trailed the party, but the Dutchman never looked back any more than he looked forward.

Whispers late one afternoon warned that the boats approached a native village. Whether it was friendly or hostile might depend on its leader's mood at the moment. The Dutchman insisted upon weighing anchor for the night although there remained three good hours of dusk. He was adamant. A hostile village must be approached in broad daylight, not in darkness or sunset or dawn.

Ham sweated, frustrated with this new delay. Neither the Dutchman nor the cannibals seemed in any hurry. They had a lifetime of enslavement, days, weeks, or months had no meaning for them, and the Dutchman was being well paid. Time was money to him, and he squandered time profligately.

"We must go on," Ham insisted. "We've hours of daylight. We may well pass the village before dark."

"We might not too. We might die at the hands of hostiles for no better reason than that we transgressed a custom of their land. Is this what you want?"

"I want to keep moving. You said the whole trip was a

risk. We can't stop at every whim of stupid natives. We've got to go on. You warned of risks. I said we would take them. I say we take this one."

But the Dutchman only laughed. He shook his head and ordered camp made for the night. He was captain of this expedition. Maxwell was only the money man who didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground about the rules and customs of this alien country. He shrugged, shaking his head again. "No," he said. "There are some risks I refuse to take. You're in my hands now, old fellow, and you'll just have to trust me."

"Something I do less by the hour," Ham said.

"Now, ain't that too damned bad."

They made camp on an island river, just out of the middle of the stream. Darkness flooded in long before the sun disappeared beyond the wall of black trees. Those trees, strung together by vines, turned to black marble with the coming of night. The silence, heavier and more oppressive than during the daylight hours, held the unnatural stillness of a trance.

Ham lay sleepless. When the blessed sun arose, it was still hours before its heat could burn away the clammy night mists and the Dutchman would allow the boats to move forward again.

When they reached the village, it was abandoned. They found others like it, being swallowed by the encroaching jungle. These places became fewer, with greater distances between them. One settlement of huts stood in a clearing on a rocky tor which seemed ripped out of the guts of the jungle. Up there, black people stirred like ants in a disturbed hill. A maze of paths wound among the huts in the clearing and through the high grass and thickets. These narrow passages were stamped and bare from heavy use, but suddenly empty and silent as the boats passed.

"They think maybe we're slavers," the Dutchman said.

The boat moved past the narrow path that led from the river landing up the hill. Two young black men, their loins wound in black rags, stood on the rough docks holding bamboo fish nets. They remained unmoving at the foot of the path, watching the boats implacably.

"They're growing accustomed to outsiders," the Dutch-

man said. "It's when we get up midway on the river where they really fear and hate strangers—and fight for the carcasses of dead animals, because that's all they've got and their lives are no good without it." He laughed and swung his arm. "Maybe they're no good anyhow. Eh?"

The boat entered a plateau of flatland, a world of mud. For days they never escaped the stink of mud, of ancient mud that surrounded the crafts and sent up a polluting mist against the high rising walls of trees. That overwhelming wilderness loomed out over the water like vines enclosing a rank bower.

Ham began to see what the Dutchman had meant, what his warnings had threatened. Traveling up this river was like going back through thick clouds of time where time itself was lost, where prehistoric beasts and primeval trees ruled the universe, a place of steam and stillness, green and almost impenetrable.

The air, even in the middle of the river, was humid and sluggish and rotten. The sunshine itself, where it was able to break through, was tarnished by mists and shadows. From the banks, the groans of mud-bathing hippos and grunts of crocodiles added to the deafening silences. This was not a place of peace for all its quiet. There hung here a pregnant stillness of eternal, unending struggle for existence as old as life itself.

In the silent eternity of mud, sky, and ribbon of navigable river, nature herself tried to forewarn intruders away from the jungles, away from the upper streams, away from the black heart of the forest itself.

The boats inched forward through mud and stench. The river banks rotted, mud and stinking slime oozing through the tormented undergrowth.

The river broke free again by nightfall. Looking for a clearing, they came suddenly and unexpectedly upon a village.

The moon rose dimly. Black figures slithered in silvery glow. A Negro howled, tortured or imprisoned by his fellows in some unseen hut or pit outside the reach of a central bonfire.

The villagers could be seen near the fire, talking, gesturing, carrying spears. Those staves were like a part of their anatomy; the men seemed never to be without them. Beyond

the firelit clearing, the forest glistened. Silences seeped inward, flowing across the villagers and their village down to the intruders in their boats. The intensity of that stillness, the threat of mindless attack, age-old dangers, plus the incredible immensity of land and darkness could send shudders through the bravest man.

The faint, mist-shrouded moonlight cast a thin haze of light over the high grass and up the wall of trees, intensifying the shadows.

The crew bent over their oars without orders from the Dutchman. They found no reassurance in the river. It flowed swiftly, impeding them, as if unconcerned with petty human life. Behind the village and on both banks of the river, the jungle reared.

The air was suddenly alive with sticks—arrows shot from concealment along the banks. These small deadly darts buzzed abruptly around their heads like maddened mosquitoes, only slightly larger and deadlier, poisoned as they were with human excrement.

The oarsmen caught up lightweight, four-foot shields and cowered beneath them, rowing as best they could.

Despite the attack, the village, the shoreline, the river, even the far mountain ranges rearing to the north remained oppressively quiet. Ham crouched in the belly of the boat hearing the hiss of arrows and the splash as they struck the water, like small fish jumping.

The rowers tried to sink to their knees behind their shields, but the Dutchman would not let them. They had to fight the fierce downrun of the current as well as the attack from the shore. The Dutchman held his gun where the oarsmen must see it, fierce and determined. The naked crewmen kept rowing.

Ham lifted his head only enough to see through the hazy gloom naked men, the banks swarming with glistening human beings, bronze bodies aglow in the moonlight.

"Run for it," the Dutchman ordered. He spoke in English, but the blacks obeyed, either his command or their own instincts of terror. The boats rocked and swayed around a twist in the river and the short, violent attack was past.

They were enclosed again in silence. Above the river growth trees reared in serrated lines, gloomy and dank. Ham looked

back at the warriors along the waterline. He carried that violent image behind his eyes for a long time, silent, unmoving figures beside the river, immobile, painted faces, bodies taut and savage with loss. . . .

Fifteen days after they embarked in the boats from Dakar, they entered the Mandingan territory on the great river. There was no landmark, no demarcation, and yet when the Dutchman said they were almost at the encampment of the Mansa Obed, Ham believed him, his pulses quickening.

The long search was almost over. His moment had arrived.

They rounded a wide turn in the river and came upon an open shore where the land lay sleek and gray and cleared. Dugout canoes lay lashed in a line along the shore. The village was free of undergrowth, a place of grass-walled, thatch-roofed huts with a stockade wall that enclosed in its dark heart a large wooden edifice on the summit of a knoll. There were no other enclosures or fences of any kind. Through his field glasses Ham stared at the gateposts of the stockade. Roughly trimmed, the poles were each ornamented with a dried, shrunken human skull.

"My God," Ham said. "I thought you said this Mansa Obed was educated."

The Dutchman shrugged. "I said he studied in Cairo. He did. I never suggested he didn't come back home to his people. All the way home."

"How can we deal with a savage who takes human heads?" Ham said.

"That is your problem, friend. You wanted me to bring you up here. Well, I did that. Now, when you leave this boat and approach Obed's village, all my warranties expire." The Dutchman laughed.

Ham's gaze kept returning to those skulls on the poles. His hopes sank lower than they had since he'd lain in his sickbed at Falconhurst, burning with fever.

On a hill, far above the clearing a fire burned on a stone square which, in the distance, resembled an altar for the sacrifice of animals or of human beings.

"Well, Mr. Maxwell," the Dutchman said. "Here we are."

Part Three:

THE MANSA

XI

Ham stood immobile, breathless, his stomach churning. He had dreamed ahead to this moment, but he had never dared to hope he'd experience it. He felt sick with excitement.

"Name of God," he whispered. "Name of God."

The seven-foot-tall Mandingan stood in a blaze of white-hot African sunlight as if that searing fireball, the sun itself, were fixed upon him, illumining him in a wonder and awe befitting his splendor.

Ham had never encountered such a human being—except in his most rabid dreams. Sweat marbled under his hatband and ran down into his eyes and along his cheeks into the corners of his mouth. This was the moment he had raced toward, all the days of his life.

He was barely aware of the people around him, the caterwauling of sounds, the babble of alien voices. He saw nothing except that perfect Mandingan specimen he'd come so far to find.

His gaze remained fixed upon this dark hunter who stood over his prey. At the man's feet was thrown, almost carelessly and contemptuously, the remains of a lioness. The animal had been slain by a javelin thrust between its eyes, its shaft still protruding from the skull, eyes wide and empty in death.

"One throw. They say the mansa slew the lion with one throw," the Dutchman said at Ham's side.

Ham hardly heard him. He saw only images seared in his mind. The preying lioness seeking food. The most dangerous foe a man could face. "He stood and faced her," the Dutch-

man continued, awed. "They say he stood as she leaped and that he drove the throwing stick at the last second, so the animal fell dead at his feet—as she lies now."

Ham nodded but did not speak. He wanted the Dutchman to shut up. On the other side of him Merrill Hallwell stood, sick to his stomach at the sight of violent death. The evangelist saw none of the glory of the hunter's kill—art, skill, courage. Well, the hell with him.

Ham shifted his weight from his game leg but never took his gaze off the hunter and his prize. Green flies buzzed about the bloodied muzzle of the carcass and the fluid-smeared feet of the black man, gorging on the blood.

The Mandigan stood, the center of all attention, proud of his kill. "It was a clean kill," he said in precise English to the Dutchman. He tilted his leonine head, looking beyond his subjects and his visitors, beyond all puny beings to the savage moment of the kill. His light, iron-tipped spear had embedded itself into the great cat's skull and the animal was dead while it still lunged, claws unsheathed, toward him.

"I knew no fear," he admitted with a childlike simplicity. There was no doubting his direct statement, no reason to doubt. If he had said he would have faced the predator with his hands bare, there was none among them to challenge him.

"I am Cheikh Obed," he said in a soft voice that carried like a trumpet in his village. "I am mansa." His gaze caressed the crowds humbled before him. "I am your king, as I am king of all hunters."

The crowd moaned in an ecstasy of agreement. Not even Ham doubted the superiority of this black over all other blacks. He squinted in the shimmering sunlight, staring up at that savage, godlike face, the shapely head caught in a white-blasted halo. Ham sighed. God knew, he was only three or four inches under six feet tall, but this black loomed above him like some obelisk erected against the heavens themselves.

Ham's breath seared hot in his throat. The searching of his lifetime had borne fruit. He had found his perfect Mandingan. What had begun as an idle dream born of fever became a passion and flared into obsession and was at last realized.

The way the mansa stood out among his people demonstrated how unique he was. The other Mandingans, men and

women, natives of this plains country of the upper Senegal, were all magnificent creatures. Each was perfect in his own way. The women were full-breasted, firm in the hips, long-limbed, and noble-looking. The men may have been brothers of the beautiful if bastardly Mede. And yet, among them, their king strode, a mammoth among pygmies.

The king stretched his arms upward and to Ham it was as if the huge man reached into the belly of the sun itself.

The mansa's personal servants came, bowing obsequiously about him. They brought water from the Senegal, warmed over hot stones in the ceremonial fire pit. They bathed the king's body lovingly and then anointed his skin from a leather flask of palm oil. The other villagers murmured praises and bowed to their knees, praising the king. He accepted their homage with that faint, open-hearted smile.

Ham had never before seen a smile of quite that quality before. It was benevolent, it was even benign, and almost, in a way, self-deprecating. His smile said that perhaps he didn't truly deserve all this adoration. It was too easy. He enjoyed it too much. He savored it and found it pleasant. That smile was also more than faintly savage, in the most dangerous sense. Ham shuddered involuntarily, because he saw in those large, wide-set, olive-black eyes and in the mild lemony twist of those full red lips, a kind of taunting—of the king himself, of this ceremony, of his subjects, his friends and even his enemies. His smile said he could destroy the strongest of them, any host of them who hated him, with ease, and yet he felt no hatred, knew no malice. He understood the minds and hearts of men and he looked with kindly compassion upon the lesser beings of this earth.

Ham took a step forward toward that open circle where the king stood alone. The Dutchman caught his arm, almost roughly. "It is not permitted," he said. "You must not approach him unbidden. You are an outsider. . . . We will send messages through his menials. . . . If the mansa will see you, he will grant you an audience. At his convenience."

Ham bit back the annoyance and frustration. This was not the way he was accustomed to dealing with others, black or white. He knew who he was and he expected others to accept him at his own value. He forced himself to relax. He had

lived with frustration all these months since he'd discovered the abolitionist on the Benson square. He could be patient a little while longer.

He stared up at the king, regal, surrounded by adoring subjects. The mansa seemed supremely civilized, even though he stood half-naked and wore only a hunter's loincloth. He stood in starkest contrast to the savagery of the painted faces and half-naked bodies around him. His quiet nobility—infused with and projecting a deep inner sense of sophistication that had been part of his culture when the Greeks still lived in caves—bespoke a simple spirituality. He was a giant, but a kindly colossal. He was a brave hunter who was not afraid to face the thundering charge of a rhino. He had proven again today that he could stand firm as a hungry lioness hurtled through the bush upon him. Yet he was a gentle man.

Ham exhaled. One thing was certain. He had never seen the mansa's like before, might never discover it again. Here was perdurable human nobility, starkly stripped of pretense or folly, greater than power, deeper than poverty, deeper than any human relationship. Here was the wordless strength of a man who had come to know himself from his own inner depths and thus knew every other man as well.

Cheikh Obed strode about the circle of his people, touching here and there, once in a while bestowing only a smile, brilliant upon the dark mahogany face. When he moved, he seemed to fill the entire circle, as if the village, the plains, the forests, and even the Fouta Djallon mountains themselves, dividing the Senegal basin from the Niger, were not large enough for him to prowl freely. He glided effortlessly, with the stalk of the panther, the shoulders steady, the narrow buttocks grinding above long, muscled legs. Those muscular legs seemed taut-wound, steel springs to propel him across a room or a savannah of sun-struck grass. He strode like a hunter, yet he had the dignity of a sovereign. He held himself in a way which made him seem even taller than he was. He had today proved himself impervious to fear and yet most importantly about him, even at this moment, was an innate gentleness—that kindliness of the animal with nothing to be afraid of.

Ham saw that the mansa's skin was not as dark as Mede's

had been, but it rippled in the sunlight with deep, warm tones of the earth. His dark brows were not ridged but, like his features, seemed sculpted of polished ivory, or of marble from ancient Egypt. The bridge of his nose was broad but not flat. His large nostrils seemed extended with the force of his breathing. His teeth glistened whitely, strong and even and bright in his thick, wide-lipped mouth. The jawline was square and his jaw seemed massive. His hair grew straight and long, swept like a mane, back from his face.

That head itself was classic. Ham had seen the barbaric native sculpture on display in Dakar. The mansa's head belonged to that powerful, rough-hewn artistry, so primitive as to inspire terror, a fearsomeness relieved only by the calm black eyes that radiated self-confidence and inner certitude.

Ham stood, fists clenched. He had found his perfect Mandingan.

XII

It was two long, eternal days before Mansa Obed granted Ham and his entourage an audience.

Ham tamped down inside him the moiling impatience and frustration of the prolonged delay. Carrying gifts, which the Dutchman still advised was a mistake, they approached the stockade, log-enclosed, at the heart of the settlement. Blacks watched from paths, from shade of baobab trees, and from open doorways of thatched huts. Half-wild dogs ran along beside them, sniffing at their legs.

In two days Ham had learned that there were among the villagers men who hated Obed, his regime, his philosophy, and everything he stood for. They were willing to tear the kingdom apart in order to rebuild it according to their ideals. Even in two days he had become immersed in the tensions that crackled like static in the jungle realm. What sort of monarch the Mansa Obed was—despot or saint—depended upon whom one questioned along the wooden wharves or in the open, violently putrid market where skins, fruit, and meat rotted, camouflaged by green flies. These enemies of the king watched with suspicion and dread as the small entourage entered the tall gates into the compound.

Inside the high walls lay a different world, dominated by a stunning two-storied log house erected on six-foot stilts. Children and dogs played in the shadowy coolness beneath the building. The rough chateau featured fifteen-foot windows, curtained by strange beaded drapes that whispered and tinkled in errant breezes. A wide-open veranda encircled the entire edifice. Stuffed hides were strewn on carpets along its walls.

The main steps from the hard-packed earth up six feet to the open gallery were twenty-five-foot slabs. These planks were oil-rubbed and looked as if they might once have served as shipboards, but this seemed hardly reasonable so far inland from the sea.

The Dutchman led the way up the steps. Ham brought up the rear. He followed Merrill Hallwell because he wanted to remain in the background. This was the most delicate moment of the entire operation. Because of native instincts in even the most backward races, he feared the mansa might somehow guess his true avocation and feel an instant antipathy. This could be deadly. He had no idea how smart this mammoth man really was, but there seemed no sense in taking risks.

Two young blacks wearing white muslin capes, red loincloths, and pointed yellow slippers held open the draperies at the doorway, bowing as the three white men entered the shadowy interior.

Ham caught his breath. He did not know what he'd expected to find in these wilds of the upper Senegal, but this was nothing he'd imagined. The huge chamber they entered was cavernous, an outsized cathedral with sixteen-foot ceilings. A plush Egyptian carpet was laid from the doorway across the polished flooring to a vaulted recess, where a dozen men were gathered in the faint, shadowy haze. At one side, to the left of the throne room, were gathered at least thirty silent young women in white linen veils. "The mansa's wives," the Dutchman whispered across his shoulder.

These females were the loveliest creatures Ham had ever seen. His stomach twisted, greed aroused. Each woman would be worth a king's ransom on the auction vendue at New Orleans. Aye God, the man who owned these dams was a wealthy fellow. Ham sighed, aching with loss.

A young black palace guard, six feet tall, muscles rippling in his arms, chest, and thighs, wearing white muslin cape, loincloth, and slippers, led them in slow ceremonious pace along the carpeting. When they were still more than thirty feet from the apse where the king and his court gathered, the youth stopped, his arms folded across his chest.

"We can approach no nearer," the Dutchman warned.

The young guard jerked his head at them and the Dutchman

nodded, understanding wordlessly. "We must prostrate ourselves," he said. His tone hardened. "It is more than a courtesy. It is expected. Hell, it's required, my friends, so hit on your knees and kiss the floor."

Merrill Hallwell sank without hesitation to his knees. Ham supposed the preacher was accustomed to such ceremony in his own religion; bowing, kneeling, and praying to something or somebody was part of all religious rites. Ham hesitated only an instant. He wanted something, and prostrating himself before a nigger wasn't too great a price for him to pay.

He sank to his knees behind Hallwell and pressed his forehead to the floor. He waited until the Dutchman stirred, not wanting to violate some rule of conduct of which he was unaware. He watched the Dutchman, following his lead. At last the Dutchman straightened, remaining on his knees. Ham and Hallwell did likewise, waiting. They stayed like this for some moments. Finally, the white-caped youth retreated a step and the Dutchman labored to his feet, panting with exertion. Ham stood. They had to assist the fat missionary to stand.

There was not a single chair in the vast auditorium, but the women reclined on silk-covered mats and near the throne room were scattered pelts of animals and Ham saw that some of the mansa's court, those of greatest authority, probably, were seated on these fur throw rugs.

They remained standing in the shadow-veiled silence for some moments. It seemed a prolonged time because no one spoke. Something was going on, Ham sensed, some decision was being made, though he had no idea what it might be.

At last a dark brown figure stood up from the furlined pads near the pillowed throne. This dark figure, clad in furs and goat horns, his face and legs brightly painted, leaped six feet out in front of the recessed throne area.

"Witch doctor," the Dutchman whispered. "He has determined that we are not rabid with evil spirits, armed, or filled with enmity."

The witch doctor pranced, dancing wildly and bending his face close over the polished floor and carpeting as if anointing the area before his king trod upon it.

At last the witch doctor staggered back, as if breathless and in some kind of trance, his ceremony complete. There was a

flutter beneath the canopied recess, and Mansa Obed, resplendent in purest white linen cape and purple pantaloons, stood up. He was barefoot and as awesome as an army with banners and swords. One didn't become accustomed to a man like this quickly. He poised there in the shadows, his face half-concealed in the hazy darkness.

A half-dozen tribal elders rose from their mats and preceded him along the sanctified carpeting, then kneeled on each side of it as if offering their monarch a path shielded by their loyalty and their lives.

"Jesus," Ham whispered under his breath. "How do they ever get anything done?"

"Shut up," the Dutchman warned. "You disturb the tranquility in here and they'll have done with you quick enough."

Ham bit his lip, retreated a step, and fell into silence. It offended every learned prejudice in him to behave with such humility at a nigger ceremony, but he was aware the Dutchman didn't lie. He tread on thin surfaces here. He could ruin it all with one word. Again he determined to let the Dutchman handle this transaction.

The magnificent mansa strode between the prostrated bodies of his subjects, moving slowly, with dignity, and with that catlike majesty that impressed Ham deeply despite his lifetime of contempt for the black race.

The Dutchman and the mansa greeted each other in Senegalese, offering all the stilted phrases of Islamic courtesy.

When these initial ceremonies were finally completed, the mansa showed his strong white teeth in a wide, warm, and, at the same time, condescending smile.

He listened as the Dutchman introduced himself. He had met his majesty before, but did not expect him to recall this. The mansa's face revealed nothing. The Dutchman presented the Reverend Merrill Hallwell and Ham, whom the Dutchman represented to be a vastly wealthy American.

The mansa beamed. He nodded toward each of them but did not offer to shake hands. In fact, he kept his hands at his sides and, despite his warm manner, there was an aloofness about him, a distancing of himself from them. "And why have you come?" the king asked in perfect English. "What is it you wish of me and my people?"

The Dutchman hesitated, glancing first at Hallwell and then at Ham. He smiled and said, "These American gentlemen have come so far to invite you to visit America—as their guest."

At first the mansa laughed. Whatever request he'd anticipated, he was astonished by their invitation, and pleased. "Why would they wish a minor tribal king to be their guest across the sea?" He watched the Dutchman's face narrowly.

The Dutchman hesitated again and then inclined his head toward Merrill Hallwell. "Present your invitation, Mr. Hallwell. This here is your only opportunity to state your case. Give it your best."

His face flushing red to the roots of his hair, the missionary cleared his throat and spoke, at first hesitantly. He told Cheikh Obed of the cancer of black slavery afflicting the American South, and of the abolitionist movement to end enslavement, to bring freedom and equality to these displaced black people.

Obed listened quietly, nodding once in a while, his face remaining calm and expressionless. Warming to the subject that directed his existence, Hallwell shifted into sermon, telling the king how slaves were beaten with whips, shackled, sold, families torn apart, children taken from their mothers so they never even knew who their parents were.

When Hallwell hesitated to draw a breath, Obed spoke gently. "This is evil, as you say. It is, though, the way of this world, sir. It is part of the American culture, but it is not isolated there. White children are sold by the thousands into slavery in the Byzantine countries annually. White men are captured by plundering ships and pressed into slavery. It is as sad as you say. But it was a condition of life even before Egypt was civilized."

Hallwell nodded, looking ill. "But it is in America where we want to end it, where we can tolerate it no longer. I and my supporters—and Mr. Hammond Maxwell here—want slavery in America abolished. Mr. Maxwell is willing to spend whatever it costs to bring you back to the United States."

"Why should I go there? What could I do?"

The evangelist spoke swiftly, gesturing, sweating. "We see in you the ideal black figure, your majesty. Educated. Strong.

Civilized. You represent the furtherest extreme from what southern Americans see in blacks—what their prejudices permit them to see in the Negro race. In America, blacks are considered the mud-sills of all civilization. They are thought of as animals, as beasts of burden."

Obed smiled faintly. "Even if I could go to America, don't you see a terrible kind of irony in your displaying me as the ideal freed black man? I own slaves, hundreds of them."

Hallwell looked as if he might vomit, weep at least. "Slavery here in Africa is a result of battles, where the loser is often enslaved. Spoils of war. In America, a whole race of people are downtrodden, mistreated, enslaved, and only because they have black skins."

Obed shrugged. "I regret enslavement of an entire people. I do not believe I could alter it."

"If you changed only a few minds, convinced only a few doubters," Hallwell pleaded, "if you appeared before these doubting people. If you made them see you—not as they see black men in their own prejudice and loathing—but as you are, stronger, cleaner, more educated, more civilized than the finest of the slave owners themselves. Who knows what miracles might result? What changes might be wrought."

Obed sighed. "I am flattered, of course. It is good to have you gentlemen believe that I might effect some change in your faraway country where slavery is already hundreds of years old." He shook his head. "But I cannot. There are too many reasons why I could not undertake a voyage away from my kingdom at this time."

"I understand, your majesty," the Dutchman said. "The rumors of intrigue and plots against your rule come downriver all the way to Dakar. . . . I can see how you would not dare to leave your kingdom in this time of crisis, with rival factions working to overthrow you."

Obed laughed. "If that were my only reason to refuse, I might well accept the generous invitation. I don't fear these fools who plot against me. I do admit that some of this tribe despise me. Why? Because they say I am too tame in my treatment of the enemies at our borders. These protesters say that I do not have the spirit of the lion because I do not decorate my house with the shrunken skulls of my enemy—or

because I no longer permit raids on neighboring lands to bring back slaves to sell to the Dutch."

The Dutchman smiled. "It is a lucrative business you're passing up, sire."

The mansa shrugged. "I don't go to war because I don't need to do battle. Only those weak enough to fear their neighbors need—or plan war. There is no enemy I fear. I make no preparations for war. If we are attacked, there is time for mobilization and battle."

Ham spoke for the first time. He desperately did not want to alienate the young monarch, but he felt his whole elaborate plan collapsing. He could not stand idly or quietly by and allow this to happen. He managed to keep his voice calm and almost casual, as if he were not even involved. "If you fear no enemies inside your country, or out of it, why could you not take a brief holiday—as our guest—in America. A vacation for you and a great service to us and your race."

Obed gazed directly at Ham for the first time. His smile faded slightly and his black eyes narrowed. He said only, "My people need me."

"Sounds as if they could get along without you for a brief time, your majesty," Hallwell urged.

Ham said, "The need is great."

Obed shook his head. "My greatest mistrust is in selfless altruism such as you gentlemen present."

Hallwell said, "We have a great need."

"And you could do great good," Ham said.

Obed shrugged, no longer bothering to look at Ham. "Why would I wish to cross the great water again?"

"Have you been to America before, sire?" the Dutchman asked.

"I have gone frequently on travels. By land and water. To Egypt. And to England. In England, I studied the white man—and the white man's way—neither of which I found to my taste." He laughed. "I was pleased and gratified to return to Senegal. I am happy to pass my days here among my own people."

XIII

Vanity, Ham thought, all is vanity. If it had not been for the innate vanity of man, the outsized self-esteem the king felt for himself, Obed would never even have agreed to travel to America.

All discussions had failed upriver in Obed's kingdom. Common sense dictated that the monarch could not abdicate his throne, even briefly, during this time of intrigue, tensions, and threatened rebellion.

Obed would listen to them, his eyes afire with inner images. He would seem interested, flattered, excited, and then cold reason would wash away his pleasant fantasies of conquests beyond the sea.

When there was nothing more to be said and even Ham had resigned himself to failure, to finding a less perfect specimen to carry back to America, the stout missionary saved the day. Hallwell, without even realizing it, appealed to the strongest trait in the young monarch's makeup.

"All I regret," Reverend Hallwell said as the conference ended, "are those huge audiences who will now never get to see you in your magnificent robes, or hear you speak."

"Audiences?" Obed's head tilted.

"Thousands," Reverend Hallwell said, nodding. "Thousands would gather, every night, to see you and listen to you speak."

"Thousands?" Obed said.

"Multitudes," Reverend Hallwell said. "They would flock to see you wherever you appeared."

Obed's mouth twisted with a strange smile. "Perhaps it

might be wise to get away from my kingdom for a brief stay. Let the divided factions fight and spill their blood, let them find they cannot conquer, or that if they do, they cannot rule. . . . When I returned, I could knock a few heads together. And things would be better than ever."

"I'm sure of it, your majesty," Ham spoke, barely breathing through his dry throat.

"Thousands. Every night," Obed said, half to himself. "Coming to see me. To hear me."

The Atlantic west of Dakar encircled their ship, the sun an alluring, diamond-hard glitter on the crest of subtropical waves. They were two days out of the Verde Pensinsula harbor before Ham breathed freely and, for the first time, he realized how badly his chest ached. It was as if he'd been holding his breath for impossibly long times for God knew how many days and sleepless nights. Now he prowled his cramped cabin or strode the decks, seeing no one, speaking to no one, caught in a tight ball of anxiety that did not release him until the shoreline of Africa fell beyond the horizon and he was certain they were not turning back for any reason. Then he allowed himself a full breath of air.

They had returned down the Senegal three or four times as fast as they'd torturously fought their way up the great, treacherous river. The oarsmen gleamed in the sun, almost relaxed, resting most of the time, dipping oars only to keep the crafts in rhythm with the downracing currents.

They arrived in Dakar amid shouting and a holidaylike gathering of black mobs, punctuated with curious white faces. These Senegalese had seen blacks before, but never one quite like King Obed. He could have entered the port town every day and he would have created that same stir of excitement and pleasure. Crowds gathered, staring, whispering, smiling, wherever he went—as he was well aware. When the crafts entered the Dakar harbor, Obed stood up in his boat for all to see. He wore a jeweled crown, tilted slightly and jauntily on his forehead, and heavy fur-and-diamond-trimmed robes though the day was swelteringly hot. He seemed unaware of the insufferable heat. He seemed unaware of the fascinated people, pointing and shouting, but one saw his great pride in the way he held his wide shoulders straight, his old-coin head high, his black eyes fixed on some middle distance.

He appeared totally at ease, accepting as his birthright the obeisances of the rabble, secured within the huge entourage he'd insisted upon bringing downriver to Dakar with him.

When it was time to board the ship, the customs people refused to permit any of Obed's people aboard the Dutch passenger freighter, *Eagle of the Sea*. Obed swore, threatened, demanded. He shouted and swung his arms and Ham felt sickness at this final failure. They had gotten the perfect Mandingan this far and still his mission must fail.

Ham spoke gently to Obed. "You have nothing to worry about, your highness. Your needs will be served."

"Am I, a king, asked to travel without servants?"

"It is an oversight, your majesty," Ham said.

Obed stared at him. The Mandingan king had not responded from the very first to Ham's attempts to be friendly. From the outset there had flared between them a white-hot reserve, an aloofness, even a chilled distaste. As much as he wished to deny it, Ham felt that tension too. Obed instinctively mistrusted him, as animals sometimes take an instant hatred toward some human being, unexplained and unexplainable. It was simply there. It existed. Obed disliked Ham without reason, without waiting for a reason. Initially, Ham had feared some ethnic, instinctive mistrust. It was there. Ham made up his mind to do all he could on the voyage west to allay Obed's cold suspicion, to win him over to accepting him, but for the moment Obed remained wary. Ham was as much his enemy as the customs people.

"You did not tell me I would be denied bodyguards or servants."

"We didn't know it," Ham lied. He winced faintly, averting his gaze from those probing black eyes. "We got a visa only for you. I see now that this was a mistake. A bad mistake. But Reverend Hallwell and I will do all we can to make it up to you."

"How can you make up to me that I must perform my own toilets, see to my own wants? I am a king. I am accustomed to being served promptly. Efficiently."

"Of course you are, your majesty. And you shall be." Ham sweated. He tried to smile. "Trust me."

"I regret, sirrah. I don't trust you."

Ham scowled, sweated and helpless. "But you trust Reverend Hallwell, do you not?"

Obed shrugged. "As much as one can trust a white face."

"Then Reverend Hallwell will tell you. I have many slaves at my home in America. They will be your servants while you are my guest. As many as you need. As many as you want. Male and female. You have nothing to worry about."

Reverend Hallwell looked ill. "Mr. Maxwell speaks true, your majesty."

Obed considered for some moments and at last shrugged his massive shoulders. "Only inconvenience while at sea?"

"And every service the ship can provide to make it easier."

Obed said nothing more. He did not speak to Ham again until they were shown to their staterooms by ship's stewards. Three outside cabins in a row had been reserved for them, all precisely the same, the king's room in the middle.

Obed took one look at his accommodations and howled in protest. "Am I expected to live in a kennel not big enough for a self-respecting dog?"

The steward tried to smile. "All these cabins are alike. Your companions are in cabins exactly like this one."

Obed shrugged, raging. "This may be good enough for them. I can tell you it is not good enough for me. Take my bags back up on deck. I go ashore. At once."

"Wait, your majesty," Ham pleaded. "What do you want?"

"I want a stateroom befitting my station, my dignity. I cannot be expected to stay in a crib like this. I'd suffocate. I need room to walk around."

The most luxurious stateroom, on an upper deck, was made available for the king's use and two stewards assigned to him for the duration of the voyage. Obed strode about the room, sniffing, his nose turned up. It was small, only two or three times larger than the cabins belowdecks. But, since it was the best the ship afforded, he would accept it. His bags were brought in and everybody relaxed, everybody except Ham. Ham waited for the anchor to be weighed, for the ship to sail. They had to be far at sea before he was going to feel at ease.

He tried to talk with Obed but found the king silent and uncommunicative. He spoke to Ham only when necessary. There was no trace of resentment or even distaste in the

young monarch's manner. It was simply that a fragile, unspoken conflict moiled in the silences between them. And it was a silence the king was in no hurry to end.

As the days passed at sea and the silences remained unbroken, and unbreakable, between him and the king, Ham found himself angered more than rueful. He kept his angers tamped down deeply inside him, where they simmered as if in some troubled cauldron.

Whatever the king wanted—and there was always some new demand, a new complaint, a new craving to be satisfied—Obed made all requests of Reverend Hallwell. When something displeased the mansa and answers had to be found, Obed questioned the preacher and ignored the planter. He seemed to trust the missionary, though he treated the fat man with an ill-concealed contempt. But that contempt was benign; it was nothing like the barbed mistrust which bristled between Obed and Ham.

This mistrust persisted just under the surface of silence that stretched between them.

Ham tried to rationalize, to quiet his growing irritation, by telling himself that Obed was a proud man and—even if unconsciously—Ham frequently found himself thinking of Obed as just another black, no better than the other niggers on his stud farm.

We're both proud men, Ham admitted. Perhaps in their mammoth pride was the root of conflict between them. They were proud men. Proud and vain.

Vanity. All is vanity, Ham thought, pacing his ship cabin. God knew it was strange how much in life turns on that unpredictable vanity of men.

Obed found the sea far less enchanting than he remembered. His voyages north to the Mediterranean Sea, to Egypt and to England, had been coast-hugging excursions limited by time and space. But now, as the ship moved beyond sight of familiar land and headed into a dark and storm-tossed sea, he was stricken by the infinite immensity of ocean, the vast distances to be traversed to that strange new world where he would be lionized. He became nauseated with the bound and fall of the ship, the inescapable smell of tar and brine, the changeless sea itself. Stewards assured him that as soon as he

threw up he would feel better. Only he didn't vomit. He remained sick at his stomach, fuzzy-headed, with vomitus burning at the base of his throat and multiplying his misery. He hated this ship, the ocean, God's universe, and, finally, God himself.

The violent pitching and tossing of the ship disturbed him because it did not seem the craft could withstand the rigors of the violent pounding. Lying in his berth at night, he could hear the stressful creak of hawsers, the groan of shipboards, the merciless pummeling of the sea. He began to see that he had not looked forward to the discomfort and cramped quarters of ocean travel when Hallwell and Maxwell came with their honeyed promises. He had hated sea travel before, but he had conveniently misplaced this old memory. He saw now that he'd looked forward to escape, to freedom from the tensions and problems of his monarchy, from the treachery of smiling faces. He had wanted badly to get away, even for a little while. Sea travel was evil at best. At its worst, it was a pit beyond hell. And he'd never been as helplessly ill as he was at this moment. The dilemmas of his troubled kingdom seemed less than hateful. He moaned deep inside. If it were within his regal powers, he'd order this ship to turn back to Dakar. But only upriver in Senegal was he a king. Here he was only another seasick passenger. A miserable black man.

He was barely conscious of the coming and going of the young white stewards assigned to serve him. In his nausea he simply did not care who came and went around him as long as they let him alone. He wanted only to be left in the cocoon of his anguish. This did not seem too much to ask. And by the third day he wished only to be permitted to die in peace and whatever dignity was left to him.

Then, sometime during the third night, the storm passed, the ship seemed to glide free abruptly from the savage grasp of rough seas onto a glasslike world of untroubled water. He slept with his massive body curled upon the narrow mattress, his face turned toward the wall.

When he finally awoke, he peered through his porthole upon a vast expanse of pond-still tranquility, awash in sunlight, almost unruffled. The sun and freshened breezes struck him in the face, reviving him.

Sighing, Obed slid his hands down his sweated nude body, conscious that for the first time in three days he was not nauseated. For the first time since he boarded this ship he felt hungry. He smiled tautly. All his hungers were not in his empty belly. He felt a gushing return of that desire which had driven him since his earliest memories, the need to find a woman, to caress her and take her where they met. It was a way of life. For him it was almost as natural as breathing, and certainly as necessary.

He stood there at the porthole staring through it, naked, his hand gripping the suddenly roused and rigid arrogance of his manhood. He gazed down at its massive brawn, as if it possessed a life and will of its own, making powerful demands that considered neither situation nor circumstance. His cock knew no discipline. It needed, it demanded, or it terrorized and tormented, demanding to be gratified or beaten to a pulp. He smiled grimly. It seemed a hell of a thing to have to beat it off. It was less than regal. It was a release he'd not been forced to fall back upon since his lonely nights in alien schools at London. Up in that cold country sexual gratification was not considered a normal, natural function of a healthy body, but was convoluted and disguised in ritual, rite, secrecy, and hypocricy.

A knock sounded at his door. Before he could react, even to withdraw his fist from his brazen staff, the door opened and a blond-headed young Dutch steward entered the stateroom.

Obed half-turned, more than faintly self-conscious at the way the youth stared at him and his maulstick.

The youth closed the door and then sagged against it, staring at the nude Negro king. "Oh my God," the boy whispered, awed. His gaze was fixed upon that rigidity at Obed's thighs.

"Who are you?" Obed said. "What do you want?"

The young steward seemed to have to collect his thoughts even to answer so simple a question. He swallowed hard. "I am Steege," he said. "I am one of your stewards. I—" His face flushed. "I have been looking in on you regularly for the past three days. . . . I am glad you are feeling better, your majesty. . . . As to what I want, sir . . . My God, that's up to you. . . . I want—whatever you want, your majesty."

"I can think of nothing you could do for me just now," Obed said. He released his choking grip on his rigid cock, but the recalcitrant member remained standing, undiminished between them. Steege could remove his gaze from it only reluctantly. "Unless"—the king smiled slowly—"unless you know some female in heat aboard this ship. . . . At this moment, I would pay well for such gratification."

"I wish I could gratify you, sir," Steege said, though he did not look as anxious as he tried to sound. "We have no wenches aboard this ship—none that I could approach for you—at any price." Steege held his breath for a long beat and then said, "There might still be something *I* could do for you, your highness."

Obed gazed at the neat-appearing youth, apple-cheeked, blue-eyed, full-lipped, in his late teens, his uniform immaculate and pressed. Obed smiled oddly. All in virginal white. He knew what Steege wanted, the youth was driven, frantic with need. Obed found this at least flattering.

Steege took a hesitant step forward. "I could serve you well, your majesty. . . . I must confess, for the past three days and nights I have come in here at all hours, waiting to serve you. Every time I came in here, though you were ill and unaware of me, I was fascinated by the sight of your—great and beautiful body."

"Why, thank you, Steege." Obed tried to keep his tone aloof and faintly remote, discouraging.

The youth's face paled and his hopeful smile died. "I could have a brass tub brought in, your majesty. Plenty of hot water. Scented soaps and toilet water . . . I could—with your permission—bathe and massage you."

Obed smiled quietly and waved his arm. "Perhaps some other time, Steege. A hot bath, even with a scented massage, just isn't what I need just now, either."

Steege looked as if he might weep. "Please, your majesty, I know what you need. Truly I do . . . I've thought of nothing else since the first time I saw you."

Obed laughed, trying to keep the conversation light. "Too bad you don't have tits."

Steege sweated, frantic, and yet convinced that the king would not take him seriously. He took another step forward,

reaching out his arms in a beseeching way. "I realize I am not what you want."

"Don't take it so personally, Steege. It's nothing against you. It's just a matter of personal tastes, you understand?"

Steege smiled again. "Then you don't despise me?"

"Despise you?"

"For behaving like this. For throwing myself at you like this. It is just that I have watched you, looked at you, devoured you with my eyes as I long to devour you. I can't help it. You are beautiful. Extraordinary. I can't get you out of my mind."

"Let me suggest a cold shower and a long walk."

"Laugh at me if you will, sir. But promise me one thing. Only one thing."

"What is that, Steege?"

"It's a long voyage, sir, to New Orleans, many weeks. If in all that time you change your mind, you decide that I might be better than nothing, better than no woman at all, I am here. At your command. I wait only to hear you call me. I shall come running. I promise you that. Anything you want, sir. Anytime. Day or night. Anything. Promise you'll remember."

Obed laughed. "I'd hardly forget you, Steege. After this."

Steege stared at Obed's rigidity and drew his tongue across his lips. "As I shall never forget you, your majesty."

Steege turned away reluctantly and went to the stateroom door. He caught the knob in his fist, gripping it, his knuckles white. He opened the door to exit, then paused and stared one last time in yearning at the naked ruler.

Obed shook his head and gazed at the youth impatiently. His gaze jerked beyond the uniformed steward to the woman who had paused, glanced through the opened door, and then stopped cold, in the corridor. The woman peered across the steward's shoulder, her eyes widening in shock, followed by stunned curiosity. Her face paled faintly and her eyes wavered. Obed found it odd that the woman, too, was dressed in white, a tall Nordic blond woman who appeared to be somewhere in her twenties or early thirties. She was nonplussed at what she glimpsed through the parted door but not embarrassed enough to hasten away along the passage.

She did not move. About her there was a sudden air of rapt entrancement. What she saw, she had never seen before. Her pale blue eyes fixed on him. Her slender fingers touched at her throat and her tongue tipped across her palely pink lips.

The three of them stood in tableau for that moment frozen in time. Obed forgot about the youth half-blocking the hatchway. Apparently, the blond woman had paused, glanced idly through the opened hatch in passing. She stopped as if her passage were abruptly blocked. She poised, as if ready to stride forward, as if intending to move on, but for the moment unable to move at all. Unmoving, she gazed at the magnificent young giant and that outsized rod pulsing at his thighs. Slowly, she turned her head so that flickering sunlight, reflected, prismlike, from somewhere, illumined the cornsilk blondness of her hair and etched the fragile lines of her Nordic features. Obed stared back openly and unselfconsciously at her, at ease in his nakedness. After a moment she raised her head and eagerly drank in the bronzed beauty of him, unable to move, not wanting to end this enchanted moment. Obed could see her features clearly in the deflected sunlight—a cameo perfection of profile, winged brows and wide-set eyes the color of asters, the elegantly sculptured line of her nose, the pale lips and faintly pointed chin. He'd seldom encountered this kind of north-country beauty before, and he felt a new surging of passionate need wash through his loins. She glittered like the hot sunlight itself. Every part of him abruptly desired her.

Steege became aware that Obed was staring at something across his shoulder and the young steward jerked his head around and discovered the woman in the passageway behind him.

"Forgive me," Steege said. "I am so sorry." He quickly closed the door behind him. For some moments Obed went on staring at that doorfacing. "I regret my stupidity, sir," Steege said. "Is there anything more I can do for you?"

Obed grinned, staring at the door. "I think you've done all I could have asked, Steege. For the moment."

XIV

Pleased with himself, with the kindly fates, and with the sudden new direction indicated in his life, Obed dressed hurriedly in silk pantaloons, linen shirt, and slippers and left his stateroom. He strode about the ship, causing a brief sensation wherever he appeared, but he did not find the blond woman anywhere. It was almost as if she did not exist, as if she were a figment of his fevered, overheated yearning. He knew better. He had looked into her lovely face, her hungry eyes. She was real all right, and he had to find her.

People delayed him, tried to talk with him, engage him in conversation, especially when they learned he spoke fluent English. Obed could give them only scantest attention. As these strangers chatted, he thought about the Nordic woman and what he had seen in her face and read in her eyes. He was drawn taut, thinking about her, needing her. In his culture, to need was to take, to desire was to find gratification. He searched the ship fore and aft, but he could not find her.

Damn these people anyway. They sought him, but not as an acquaintance or possible friend. It was as though he were a freak in a sideshow, something they had never seen before. They wanted to stare at him, to talk to him, to touch him, and to probe his mind. He was something unusual in their existence, an exciting object of their curiosity, not a human being at all. Inside, he raged with angry laughter. If only they knew how human he was. If they could guess what he truly wanted—hell, needed, desperately, they would not clutch at him as he tried to pass them.

He came accidentally upon Reverend Hallwell, freshly

shaven, the skin of his chubby cheeks glowing from his razor, his corpulent body encased in a dark broadcloth suit despite the heat. Obed tried, even at the last minute, to avoid the missionary, but Hallwell spied him, calling out. When he could not escape, Obed stifled his anger and agreed to have breakfast with him in the ship salon.

People at other tables stared when they entered the salon, whispering and smiling together. Hallwell's stubby corpulence made the king seem larger than ever. The people called out to him as if he were less than human, with no rights to privacy. Obed did not answer but gazed at them with that benign smile that made the blood run cold in more perceptive minds.

Obed was barely aware of what he ate, and even less conscious of what the preacher was saying. Obed was hungry, but not for food. He ravenously desired companionship, but not the empty-headed prattle of this fat man. Aye God, he knew what he wanted all right, and he knew that Reverend Hallwell was unknowingly standing in his way. Obed sat there, miserable, sweated, noises buzzing around him like flies. He could see that blonde woman behind his eyes. He could think of little else.

After breakfast Hallwell insisted that they promenade the decks. "Best thing in the world after a big meal, Mansa Obed. Not that you ate that much. My Lord, I'd think a man as big as you would have an appetite as big as a barn."

"I have big appetites."

"You hardly ate a bite. But maybe walking in this sun and sea air will give you an appetite."

"I hardly think so."

"Good exercise," the minister insisted. "The best. I take long walks about the decks first thing every morning, last thing every night."

Obed could hardly imagine any regimen more reprehensible. Still, in strolling the breadth and depth of the ship, even in company with the little fat man, there was the chance that he might glimpse the blonde again. He drew a deep breath. He needed only to find her. She needed only to look at him again as she had in that corridor. . . .

"We can become great friends aboard this ship," Hallwell said. "You and I. Great friends."

"What?"

"I said shipboards are great places for making fast, lifelong friendships. I'm glad to have these quiet weeks ahead with you. We have much to talk about. Much to learn of each other." Reverend Hallwell laughed. "Nowhere else on earth can a man get to know his fellow man more quickly and thoroughly than aboard a ship like this. A ship—for the weeks or months of the cruise—becomes a small cosmos. An entire universe in miniature, a planet adrift in the vastness of the ocean, as the earth revolves in space. We can get to know each other quite well by the time we reach America. . . . If we can know and understand each other, we can understand each other's people better. There are great adjustments to make—between you and the people you will meet in the months ahead."

Obed did not respond. He scarcely listened to the minister. His eyes searched the faces of the other passengers, avidly seeking. . . .

Obed escaped the missionary as soon as possible. It seemed an eternity to him. The fat man was not the sort of companion he would have willingly sought, even in a restricted universe like this. He exhaled heavily. The missionary had no inkling of what thoughts and needs and yearnings burned inside the young monarch. Obed supposed it was just as well. Hallwell would not understand, even if he knew. All Hallwell's yearnings and desires had long ago been sublimated, twisted, perverted, and buried. He would no longer recognize them even if they were dragged out and displayed before his outraged eyes.

Obed left word with a steward that he wanted to see Steege at once and then returned to his cabin. The young Dutchman came eagerly, hurrying, barely pausing to knock.

He found the youthful king almost where he had left him, standing at the bulkhead, peering through the porthole. The difference was that now the monarch was no longer naked. Still, Steege found him incredibly lovely. Beautiful. A host of armies with banners. Cedars of Lebanon. Mountain crags. He smiled hopefully. "You sent for me, your majesty?"

"Yes. I want you to do something for me."

"Anything, your majesty. Anything. You know that." The steward took several steps toward him.

Obed smiled and shook his head. "Not that, Steege. Not just now. This is something else. Do you know the name of the woman who stood in that corridor out there this morning?"

Steege winced. "That would be the Countess Venter. Ulla Venter, your majesty. She is from Sweden. She is of royal blood."

"Yes. So am I. It is not bloodlines that interest me just now, Steege. I want the number of her stateroom."

The youth winced, the anguish and flaring of hopeless jealousy flaring in his eyes.

"I am afraid this is not permitted, your majesty."

Obed stopped smiling. His voice hardened. "Neither is your coming in here soliciting sexual encounters."

Steege winced. "Forgive me, your majesty. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to antagonize you. . . . Of course I'll tell you the countess's room number if you wish it. . . . Still, I cannot pretend I am not injured."

"The room number."

The door behind the young steward was thrust open and the blonde beauty herself stepped through it.

Obed straightened, awed, and stared at her, forgetting his sudden anger with the steward. He even forgot the youth's existence.

He heard the woman say, "You may go now, Steege. We won't need you anymore just now."

The steward hesitated. He glanced helplessly toward Obed, then looked again at the countess. They had already forgotten him. Holding his breath, his eyes burning with tears of frustration and rage, he withdrew quietly, closing the door.

Ulla Venter smiled. "I hope you'll forgive my barging in upon you like this. . . . I assure you, I don't ordinarily behave in this crass and ill-bred manner . . . but I feel this to be an extraordinary moment. . . . I was in my stateroom. Next door."

"Next door?"

The Countess Venter nodded. "I heard you and Steege talking. Through the walls. They are paper-thin, you know, between these staterooms. You'd be astonished at what you

can hear if you listen. . . . I am not naturally curious, but I was interested in what you were saying to the steward."

Obed watched her closely. His gaze moved over her slowly but avidly. He found her comely, slender, yet full in the breasts, rounded of hips, with long legs suggested against the sheer dress she wore. He said, "I have been looking for you."

She nodded, tipping her tongue across her pale lips. "Yes. I hoped you would."

"I couldn't find you. Where were you?"

Her Easter-lily face flared red to the roots of her yellow-gold hair. She hesitated a long moment and then decided to be totally honest with him. She bit tentatively at her underlip. "I am afraid that after I saw you, I was slightly indisposed. . . . It seemed as if everything inside me flooded downward. Hot. Liquid. My legs threatened to buckle under me. I was too weak to go on to the salon for breakfast, and I was no longer hungry for food anyway. The thought of food made me nauseated. . . . I went back to my room. I stayed there, too weak to resist my sudden, forbidden urges. I fought my base impulses, but finally I had to submit. I needed so much. . . . I had only my hand. A poor substitute . . . and yet it was all I had."

Obed smiled. "I know how you felt."

Ulla Venter regained some of her composure. "Do you? I'm afraid nothing like this has ever happened to me before."

"I got dressed. As quickly as I could. I went looking for you. I searched the entire ship. . . . I hoped what I glimpsed in your eyes was what I wanted so desperately to see. . . ."

She did not permit subterfuge between them. She nodded, her face pale. "I'm afraid it was."

"Afraid?"

"I am not a common harlot."

He grinned in that benign way. "No one suggested you were."

Ulla drew a deep breath. "Nor am I easily aroused—as I was this morning at the sight of you, of your—body. Your rigid nakedness . . . I have been trained in seemly behavior. I know what is permitted. And what is not."

He went on gazing at her, pleased with everything he saw,

the desires moiling low in his loins. "And what is not permitted?"

"To submit—to primal urges . . . like a—a savage. . . . I am a civilized woman. . . . Despite what I have admitted to you, I am civilized and proper."

He sighed. The words did not matter, the words only spanned the space between them, like a bridge. "Why did you admit your—secret behavior to me?"

Something flickered deep in her pale blue eyes. She tilted her head slightly. "I don't know. . . . Yes, I do know. It was *my* nakedness. I was exposing *my* nakedness to you—as you stood exposed to me this morning. I felt it somehow made us even."

"How nice."

She drew a ragged breath. "There is nothing *nice* about it. . . . No matter what, I cannot throw myself at you—as I seem to be doing—like a bitch in heat. . . . I cannot. I won't let myself."

He pushed his tongue into his cheek. "I am afraid that loss will be yours then—"

"I know what my loss is. What it might be . . . I saw you standing there. Naked. It was as though I'd been struck in the face by a huge fist."

He laughed in a gentle, teasing way. "And yet now you insist upon behaving according to the unnatural rules of an unnatural society?"

"It is my society. My world. I cannot abruptly strip away all I have been taught all my life. . . . No matter how beautiful you are."

He peered down at her. "Then why did you come in here?"

"Because I had to. I heard you asking for me. For my stateroom number. I knew it would be only a matter of time. Until you found me, until I found you. What you wanted of me was what I would want to give. . . . It was all very clear. Natural. All pretense stripped away."

"And now?"

"And now it still is clear. But I know we must abide by some rules of conduct, conventions. . . . I won't let you

throw me on that bed there, or on the floor—like an animal—no matter how much I might want it."

He drew a deep breath, held it. After a beat, he shrugged. "You are free to go, Madame Venter."

She did not move. "Don't be a fool. I don't want to go. That's not what I meant. I want what you want. Perhaps more . . . Because I am an ordinary woman. You are an extraordinary man. . . . You are what the gods on Olympus must have been. . . . I've never seen anyone like you before. I am flattered that you might want me. Thinking about it turns me to whey inside."

Obed frowned, smiling at the same time. Name of God, how puzzling these far-northern women were. Puzzling even to themselves. "Then what is the problem?" he inquired.

She exhaled a ragged breath as if she'd not breathed for some moments. "Call it a veneer of civilization. Call it whatever you want. But—I want you to—to court me—for a little while. How long? How briefly? God knows. . . . But we can't just lunge and leap at each other. . . . We've got to be more civilized than that."

He smiled in a crooked way and after a moment bowed to her. "As you wish, Madame. . . . I shall prove, Countess, that an African king can be just as—civilized—as Swedish royalty."

Time speeded up aboard the ship. For the next day or so it was like a game between them, a cat-and-mouse game that Obed hated. It was part of the hypocritical rites of courtship, so dear to the civilized nations and their churches. He knew from the first moment what he wanted. He was equally as certain that he understood the desires boiling inside the cool-appearing Countess Venter. But he had given his word and he played along with her though his loins ached and he promised himself that the lady would pay dearly for this stupid delay once he did have her naked in bed.

Despite the agonized yearnings simmering inside him, his outward demeanor was impeccable. She could not have asked for a more reserved and proper suitor. It was only deep in his empty belly where he shuddered with the desires racking him, the savage instincts he'd never been taught to rein in or curb.

They danced together in the ship's ballroom. They were the center of attention. They were an exotic sensation among the other passengers and the crew. The countess wore a lovely white silk gown which shimmered, seeming to melt along the supple lines of her body. A diamond tiara enhanced her regal beauty and set her even further apart from the ordinary mortals aboard. Her inner fires caused the pump of her heart to flood blood hot and red against her pale cheeks and to inflame her eyes.

But it was the king Obed who was truly the exotic figure. His plumage was colorful as a peacock's, from bright upturned slippers to purple pantaloons, sleeveless silk jacket encrusted with jewelry. All eyes watched them, every move they made. They were the center of all eyes.

With the need pulsing stronger inside him by the moment, Obed tried to speed up the rites demanded by the countess. As they danced, he said into her ear, "I can go on playing this game of yours as long as you like," he said. "But it is not my favorite game. There are others where I excel."

She smiled up at him, missing a step. "I'm sure there are, your majesty. And I look forward to them."

"You talk boldly, yet you keep me at arm's length."

"It is no easier for me than for you," she told him.

"How will I know when you're ready?"

She gazed up at him gravely. "You'll know," she said, "when you find my stateroom door unlocked."

Ham raged down the ladder from the upper deck, his neck flushed red, the pulses pounding in his throat. He rapped furiously upon the Reverend Hallwell's stateroom door and then threw it open, entering before the missionary had time to react or to invite him in.

Ham found the stout little abolitionist propped up in his bunk reading his Bible and sipping contentedly upon a hot toddy.

Ham slammed the door behind him and charged across the room. "How can you sit there and read that crap with what's going on up on deck and in the ballroom of this ship?"

Hallwell merely gazed up at him, unruffled. "I find

consolation—and patience, in this book, Brother. . . . I think you could too."

"Well, I don't give a damn what you think—except I want to hear what you plan to do about our goddam nigger—"

"Nigger?" Hallwell peered up at Ham, his mouth twisted in disdain at the ugly word.

Ham shrugged. "All right. The king. That black son of a bitch is sniffing and rutting around some white woman like he's about to crawl her—right in front of God and everybody."

Hallwell laid the book aside. "Mansa Obed is free to do what he wishes. I repeat. He's free. As free as you and I. Freer. More privileged. He is a king."

Ham clenched his fists at his sides. He'd almost reached the end of his rope with this abolitionist bastard. He had what he wanted from him now. It was hard tamping down new rages that flared at every word from the mealy-mouthed nigger-lover. "The hell he is. A king maybe in those godforsaken wilds upriver in Senegal. Aboard this ship he's just another nigger—"

Hallwell sat up and swung his feet off the bunk. He braced his arms on each side of him and shook his head, his face set. "I don't think so, Mr. Maxwell. The captain said Mansa Obed is the first black ever to sail this ship as a paid passenger—"

"That's right. I'm sure he is. And I am also sure he can get himself killed. He can get us all killed."

Hallwell tried to smile in a placating way. "I think you are letting yourself get all roused up about nothing, Mr. Maxwell. The king is young. He wants a good time. It is nothing else, I'm sure. Nothing."

"Nothing?" Ham looked ready to explode with rage. "That black son-bitch is whoring after a white woman. In front of everybody."

Hallwell smiled bleakly. "You're not back home in Alabama now, Brother Maxwell."

"You're goddamn right I'm not. I'd know what to do in Alabama if a nigger so much as looked a white lady straight in the face. A hangrope for a killing offense. A goddamn hangrope would be too good for this son-bitch."

"You should calm down, Brother. We're a long ways from

Alabama. A world away from that dark, unenlightened place. Europeans are far more enlightened and tolerant than the southern Americans. These people accept blacks for what they are. Human beings."

Ham paced the small cabin. Porthole to door. Door to porthole and back to where Hallwell sat, undisturbed, watching him. "We got to stop him, and stop him before it's too late."

"Why? Mansa Obed has every right to pursue any woman he wishes."

"Any black woman. I give you that. But he can't lust after white ladies. Not if he's going down South. That's one of the first things we've got to teach this son-bitch. And this is as good time as any to start. We can stop him before he does something heinous—like crawling a white lady."

"Obed can *crawl* that white lady, Brother, as you so crudely put it—if *she* wants him to."

Ham felt as if the room were reeling around him, as if the walls were crowding in so that he could not get a full breath. Not even all the months he had known and listened to this fat abolitionist prepared him for this moment when he found Hallwell unmoved by the scandalous fact that at that moment a black buck might be raping a white lady.

"If *she* wants him to? My God, Hallwell, what she wants ain't got a goddamn thing to do with it. We know what's right and wrong. You. Me. We know. A black buck lusting after a white lady is wrong. In God's sight. Against the law. And we got to teach him that."

Hallwell shook his head. "I've told you, Mr. Maxwell, from the first. We cannot treat this king like your ordinary enslaved blacks. He is not one of them. He is your equal. In some places he'd be considered and accepted as your superior. You've got to understand that. He's free to do as he wishes."

Ham stared at the pudgy-faced minister. "Good God almighty. Are you saying you believe it's all right for a black buck—even a black king—to pester a white lady?"

Hallwell sighed. "Let me ask you a question, Brother Maxwell."

Ham waved his arms impatiently. "Go ahead. But you are

wasting time while that black son-bitch rapes a white lady and gets hisself hung—and, likely, you and me killed."

"The question I have for you, Brother. Didn't you sleep every night with a black bedwench while I was your guest at Falconhurst?"

"Hell, you could of had one if you wanted it. What in hell has that got to do with this?"

Hallwell went on peering at him. "Have you some God-given right to take a black woman into your bed, whether she's willing or not, while it is a God-decreed wrong for a black man to want a white woman?"

"That's right. Now you've said it. You begin to see the way it is. You're fuckin' well right it's different. I'm glad that even you, an abolitionist, has got to see that's different."

Hallwell shook his head. "I see no difference."

"Then that's because you are a fool and you simply won't see. God knows it's different. As night is different from day. Black dams is just animals what can talk. To be used any way a white man sees fit. That's always been true."

"Has it?"

"You know goddamn well it has. White ladies hate and despise pestering. That's a well-known fact. You ask any white gentleman that's been married more than two years. Them gentle ladies. They submit. For childbearing. And that's about all. But no white lady worth the name of lady ever enjoys pesterin'. . . . They wouldn't be ladies an' they did. . . . You know that. . . . But them black dams is always boiling and ready to pester. You just got to push them over on their heels. That in itself makes it different. And God knows we can't have black bucks thinkin' they can pester white ladies at will—not if we're going to have a civilized world. . . . Now, goddamn it, we've talked enough. . . . I want you to git up there and stop that black buck before it's too late. He'll listen to you. And you best make him listen if you don't want him hung from some yardarm."

"Well, I won't do it." Hallwell shook his head, his jaw set.

"You condone this thing? You? A minister of God?"

"Whether I do or not. That doesn't matter. There's only one point here. This is not my affair."

"Well, you best make it your affair, Mister. You let that randy buck fool around like this with that white woman up there and you'll get him killed, king or no king."

Obed hesitated in the passage and touched the knob of the countess's door. His heart lurching, Obed turned it in his fist. Her door was unlocked! He was less than astonished and yet some charge spurred him, deep in his loins. He smiled. It had not taken the countess long to discard the trappings of conventional society and its mores.

He opened the door and stepped inside. The lamps glowed brightly, warmly, within her stateroom. The place was alive, pulsing with the scent of her. He could hear the pounding beat of waves against the ship plankings, the spanking of winds in topsails, the pounding of his own heart.

The countess stood across the room, awaiting him. She was nude. He had never seen a body so glitteringly white. The dark triangle at her thighs, the ruby-pink of her nipples only intensified that ceramiclike whiteness.

Ulla remained standing for some moments with her arms at her sides, her head back, statuesque and statuelike.

Obed let the sleeveless jacket slip from his shoulders. He padded across the room in his soft slippers, a whispering sound upon the carpeting. The silences of the stateroom intensified.

He went close to her. Ulla reached out and removed his shirtwaist. Then she caught her fingers in the band of his pantaloons. He stood, feeling himself grow rigid. She drew her hands downward, peeling the cloth away. When he was naked, she remained on her knees, staring, awed, fascinated, at the great rod quivering before her eyes.

He caught the sides of her golden head suddenly in his fist, pulling her face against his crotch, pressing her so tightly to his thighs and testes that she could barely breathe. He closed his eyes and put his head back, enjoying this moment of supreme mastery. She was his.

For some entranced moments, the countess remained on her knees to Obed in a kind of sensual obeisance. With his large hands gripping her head, she nuzzled and nursed him, exploring him with her hands, hefting his cod with her palms

and, trembling with pleasure, caressing him with her fingers. At last she drew away, her pale mouth bruised, her eyes glittering. Obed flinched slightly. There was about her a look of frantic anxiety, a kind of unleashed insanity.

She stood up, her body pressing against his. "I'll tell you what I want you to do," she whispered.

"It is not what you want, Countess. Not now. Not here. No more. It's what I want now. . . . You are enslaved to me, or I don't want you at all. I know nothing else, no other way."

Her clouded eyes flickered, but she did not speak. Her head sank on his muscled arm and she lay, her eyes closed sleepily, her lips parted. He covered her mouth with his, thrusting his tongue deep into her throat. Her whole body quivered, as if convulsed.

He swung her lightly up in his arms and carried her to her bed. She lay supine upon the mattress, waiting. He drew his hands from her shoulders, over her firm, high-standing breasts, along the flat planes of her belly to the wet, hot flooding at her thighs. She had not exaggerated the wildness of her desiring. She lay helpless with passion.

He pushed her legs apart, bent her knees, and moved inside her thighs. She encircled his hips and locked her ankles about his waist. She screamed when he penetrated her and he clapped his mouth over hers to silence her. He felt the gushing flood of her liquidity. Her hips battered wildly. She rose to one mindless climax, and another and another. It was as if now that she had submitted to her passions and to him, she no longer controlled her own body.

Obed rode her, at first with measured strokes, trying to draw fullest gratification from their nearness, with delight at the fiery floodgates she opened to him. Almost, he had only to touch her to drive her out of her mind, into a frenzied bucking of her hips and then the savagery of her release. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders, clawed along his muscular back. When he tried to withdraw, even for a moment, she caught at him, sobbing with unfulfilled need. . . .

Once roused, the countess was insatiable. He was still in her bed at daybreak. An eternal, sleepless night. He'd known hundreds of women; at home, thirty wives and concubines

awaited him, but he'd never encountered a woman of such mindless passion.

When she did lay quiet, exhausted, for a few moments at a time, she wept, pleading with him to return to Sweden with her. "Come home with me," she whispered, breathless. "I'll give you the world."

Obed did not answer, but his mouth twisted wryly. What good the world if he were dead in a month?

He read her unnamed desires in her unbridled passions and gave her what she wanted. She wanted to be used in every way known to sensuality, and he used her. He put her on her hands and knees and kept her there until her arms and legs were too weak to support her. He had everything he wanted and, long before dawn, more than he wanted. She grabbed too frantically, clutched too possessively, held too tightly. She wanted too much. She forgot the most important fact between them, even in this madly rumpled bed. *He* was the king. . . .

By daybreak he was glad to escape to his own stateroom next door. He whistled between his teeth. He'd have only a short respite before she'd come clawing back at him, but he would rest.

His appetites for women—or men—or any sexual contacts had been surfeited in his encounter with the insatiable countess and he suddenly had no desire for *any* human contact lest it might lead toward sexual involvement. The sweated, eternal night in Ulla's stateroom had confused him. At the moment he was not sure he would ever dare to touch another white woman. Poor wretches. Denied by their reedy, sallow little men, they were starved; they demanded instead of giving or sharing.

He was desperately tired but sleepless. He stood immobile at the porthole following the never-changing pattern of the dark ocean. Strong, vital longings would well in his body again as soon as he was physically recuperated, rested, restored, yearnings demanding release, as always. But he had to be the aggressor, the lovemaker, the pursuer, the hunter, the master of the game. It sapped a man's sense of manhood to be the object, the hunted. His hands closed tightly, his thick knuckles graying out. He reassured himself he was only

suffering exhaustion. His needs would return. But at the same time he was afraid no matter how sexually hungry he became, he'd be leery of any white woman as long as he lived. This one had sucked him dry. . . .

Ham was drinking in the ship's bar when the Reverend Hallwell found him. Ham had washed his hands of Obed's affair with the Swedish woman. He admitted he was still shocked when he saw the two of them strolling the deck together, arm in arm. He was never going to change about that. Black was black and white, white. Black bucks had no place with white women, even when the females didn't seem to know any better. Not even the bright linen pantaloons and colorful shirts of the mansa, or the North-country beauty of the countess made their coupling acceptable as far as he was concerned. It was still a buck humping a white lady and that went against the grain, against everything he'd been taught to believe.

He could not credit that the other white people aboard were so casual about the affair between the buck and the countess. But, he admitted, the romance had stirred up no vocal protest at all as far as he could tell. These travelers were either hellish tolerant or hellish ignorant, as far as he could see. These people accepted the black and white lovemaking as an entirely ordinary matter. At first he blamed the woman, cursing her for a weak and immoral vessel, a woman willing to go on all fours like an animal with an animal. Then Ham came to pity the woman, because he decided her being from the far north, where a black was totally unknown, she simply didn't know the rules of decent conduct between the races. She could at least have had the tact to hide her contact with the buck.

It pained him to see them together, but there they were, constantly. Seeing them, Ham would stifle his outrage and anger and turn away. It didn't matter though where he turned; there they were. A secluded haven on the stern, standing, arms linked at the railing in the sunset. They promenaded the decks hand in hand, blissfully unaware of the *white* people around them, watching them.

Sometimes they would climb together into the rigging to

watch the prow of the ship churn the gray waters of the Atlantic into white wake. At others they would spread a blanket on the deck and lie, backs bared, basking in the sun. It was enough to turn a decent man's stomach.

"It makes me sick to my belly to watch them," Ham said to Hallwell as if the missionary, joining him at the bar, followed his thoughts.

The minister ordered a hot toddy and sat on a stool beside the planter. He did not pretend ignorance of what Ham was talking about. He only said gently, "Well, it's caused no scandal. No killings. No hangings."

"It's giving that buck ideas that he can reach for any white woman he sees," Ham said. He grimaced. "That's sure as hell going to git him killed down South."

"Well then, maybe we shouldn't take him down South and risk his life."

Ham sat forward, his ruddy face going pallid. "What? Not take him down South? Why else did we bring him all this way?"

"Not to endanger his life. We've no right to do that. We can get all the huge audiences we need up North. I can see the crowds. Everywhere he appears—in his robes and crown and with his English accent. Hundreds will come. Thousands. By the scores they'll come to see the beautiful black man, the educated African, to hear him talk to them on the evils of slavery."

"We got to take him south."

Hallwell shook his head. "Not if we might threaten his safety."

"He'll be safe long as we keep him leashed."

"Leashed? Don't you understand yet, Brother? Obed's a king. Royalty. You can't treat him like an ordinary field hand."

"I was thinking maybe we can have him do some exhibition fighting—"

"What?" Hallwell stared at Ham, disbelieving, his eyes round.

Ham nodded. "Especially down South. Nothin' draws crowds down South faster than airy nigger fight. You'd really rake in the money—for your cause—like you never dreamed."

"Maxwell." Hallwell almost trembled in his frustration. "This man is royalty. We can't ask him to fight."

Ham shrugged. "We can tell him." For the first time since he'd met Merrill Hallwell, Ham spoke coldly, in that imperious way of his that brooked no opposition.

Hallwell shook his head. "There's no way we can force Mansa Obed to fight like a common Negro. I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't even ask him."

"You might just have to rethink this, Hallwell. I don't know about you, but I'm bringing this—this black—to America to make a lot of money. On exhibition. We never fooled each other about that. And that's where I mean to put him. We can have him fight—fightin' the evils of slavery with his fists. That'll go over big down South."

"Name of God."

"What's the matter with you?"

Hallwell scrubbed his hands together. "I'll have nothing to do with it."

"Oh? And what do you think you'll do?"

"First, I'm going to get drunk."

At a little past midnight Ham returned from the bar and upper decks to his stateroom.

He felt pretty good. On the surface it had been another uneventful day at sea, a mild, warm day, with the dark Atlantic tamed and the sky marred only with mares' tails of clouds. But things were going his way.

It was quiet in the lower deck corridor when Ham came off the gangway. Faint lamps glowed along the narrow passage. He steadied himself against the lurch of the ship, and when he straightened he saw the ship's officers and stewards. They were gathered around his door, pounding on it and calling his name through the facing.

"You gentlemen looking for me?" Ham inquired, his tone slurring slightly. It had been a wet day, too, since his argument with the missionary.

"We've been looking for you for some time, sir," the superior officer said. "We've been quiet worried. Quite upset."

"You don't have to worry about me, gentlemen. I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself."

"Haven't you heard the news, sir?"

Ham moved his shoulders. "Haven't heard anything, officer. Had a little too much to drink. Fell asleep in a deck chair. Just woke up a little while ago."

The officer exhaled heavily. "I'm afraid your traveling companion has been lost overboard—"

"King Obed?" Ham's face went gray.

"No, sir. His highness is accounted for. As are all passengers now we've found you. Someone saw a man fall from an aft deck. It was very dark but they were certain he cried out and he was for a moment illumined in ship lights. We've searched the ship. Our check of passengers proves the victim to be your friend Mr. Hallwell. I can't tell you how deeply sorry we all are that Mr. Hallwell perished at sea like this."

Ham cursed. He was cold. He felt no sorrow, no sense of guilt or responsibility, or even of compunction. Hallwell had served his purpose. Someone had seen Hallwell fall. No one had seen him pushed. As far as Ham was concerned, Hallwell was already dead and had been since that hot afternoon he'd found him on the square at Benson. He shrugged. "I told the son of a bitch not to prowl alone—and drunk, the way he stayed—late at night like this. It was bound to happen. I told him. It was bound to happen."

XV

New Orleans!

Something like an exhilarating elixir rode in the very atmosphere, even for Obed, who was seeing the Crescent City for the first time. He felt a rising sense of excitement and anticipation as the *Eagle of the Sea* hove into port. They had sailed up the Mississippi through lush bayou country, a seemingly endless winding waterway that doubled back on itself again and again as if delaying that longed-for moment of arrival. Then around a twist of the serpentine river, the eternal harbor came into view.

Obed stood alone on the bow of the ship drinking in the sight of this enchanted land. He was barely aware when Steege came and stood near him at the railing. Obed ignored the steward. He vaguely heard the youth talking about this magical Paris of the new world, though. The fifty-eight inches of rainfall a year. The whores prowling the streets, male and female. A town that was a conglomeration of seven towns really and all of them five to fifteen feet below sea level. A strange and awesome city. "And mosquitoes." Steege laughed. "Mosquitoes the size of small birds. In Africa you might call them canaries."

Obed smiled faintly and Steege added, "The town is so low that no bodies can be buried underground. They keep rising to the surface. People rent crypts. For a year and a day. That's how long the corpse is allowed to stay. Bodies are put in receiving vaults. When bodies are shoved into the crypts, the remains of the former 'renter' are pushed out the back of the crypt."

"My God. How barbaric." Obed smiled, then he said. "Looks like a city where a man can have a good time."

"Anything you want." Steege nodded emphatically. "You want it, you can find it. For a price. More freed blacks live in New Orleans than anywhere else in the South. And whores! Old Andrew Jackson insisted on paying off his Tennessee volunteers in New Orleans instead of first marching them back home. Whores by the thousands flocked to the smell of gold. Most of the soldiers are gone, but the whores are still here. More now than ever."

"You make it sound like the center of the universe."

"It's one of them."

At the sight of the bustling, promising metropolis, Obed forgot the rigors of the long sea voyage, the death of the missionary, even the countess, who still believed he would go back to Sweden with her.

A sensation of elation and new freedom gripped Obed. Now that the hectic sea journey was over, he looked forward to this strange, unknown world and the wonders Hallwell had promised he would find here. He saw the piers piled high with the overwhelming abundance of commerce from every corner of the globe. Vessels of all rigs, shapes, and tonnage were moored, sometimes three abreast in the winding river, along the high-piled levees. Some were oceangoing ships, with sails furled, flying flags of dozens of nations. At the docks a congestion of keelboats, paddle-wheelers and river craft such as he had never seen before bobbled at anchor. Not even the port of Dakar could compare with the wonder and traffic of this place. Pungent scents of rums and molasses, coffee, naval stores, newly hewn pine, cedar, and cypress assaulted the nostrils. Men of every nationality prowled the quays and cobblestones and banquettes—Spanish, Cuban, Norwegian, French, and, as Steege pointed out, raw, back-country American. A babel of languages rose in a caterwauling din around him—English cockney, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian. Strange dialects he'd never heard before. Some seemed even to be speaking English, but their words were so slow, soupy, and slurred that he could not understand them. No one seemed to hurry and yet there was a sense of fevered activity along the piers. Freed blacks moved about as if they owned

the cobbled streets. Hookers, peddlers, pickpockets, pimps, whores, mincing Creole men, and exotic Creole women sought their fantasies in the overheated port. Street vendors sold hot peanuts and hot crab legs, gumbo, and red beans in rice. Men shucked oysters and gulped them down raw, splashing them with blood-red cayenne pepper sauce.

Obed felt assailed by the smells of food, simmering, boiling, frying, every taste tempted. Catfish fried with the eyes still popping and juicy in their heads, pickled pig knuckles, pork ribs and ham hocks, huge cauldrons bubbling with okra and seafoods and stacks of crisply fried chicken wings, spiced and hot. Pies cooled on open counters along the streets—pumpkin, apple, cherry, or pecan. At every booth, no matter what else was offered for sale, stood kegs of sugarcane stalks for a penny each. Shrimp prepared in every manner to whet the appetites of blacks and Creoles. Oysters steaming in vats, fried in corn meal, open on the half-shell. A wondrous place where every appetite could be sated.

Obed laughed, staring down at the milling docks and streets. "It's like Babylon must have been," he said in awe.

"Or Sodom." Steege laughed. "Gomorrah. One town or the other."

Ham appeared. He told Obed to collect his baggage. "We're debarking now. Bring your things."

Obed glanced at the white planter, mouth twisting. He secured a small pouch of gold coins at his waistband but he did not even look at the piles of his baggage. He strode along the railing toward the newly lowered gangplank.

His face flushing red, Ham swore. He offered Steege two dollars to carry the king's baggage down to the dock. Steege agreed willingly.

Loaded with the carpetbags, he watched Obed stride regally along the dock and down the gangplank. Even the most blasé dockworker stopped working when Obed appeared in his bright silk pantaloons, linen shirt, and colorful turban. Until this moment they thought they'd seen everything down here.

On the dock Ham paid off Steege and the steward said good-bye. Obed caught the youth in his arms and embraced him warmly. Steege's eyes brimmed with tears and he bowed to the king, saying good-bye under his breath.

Impatiently, Ham looked around for a hansom cab. He saw a large hack driven by a black man in tall smokestack hat. He whistled and gestured. The hack rolled toward them through the crowds.

People slowed, forgetting errands and meetings elsewhere. All of them wanted to look at the black man who towered above the biggest dock worker and yet wore bright slippers and silk pants.

The old man clambered down from the boot of the cab. He stowed Ham's and the king's luggage in the rear and held the door open for them. Ham moved to get into the conveyance, but Obed's sharp voice, under his breath, stopped him, cold. "I'll enter the cab first, Mr. Maxwell."

Ham winced, but hesitated and then stepped back, permitting Obed to precede him. People crowded closer, peering into the windows of the cab. Ham got in and the driver slammed the door. He sank back in the seat biting back the rage moiling deep in his belly.

Ham told the driver to take them to the nearest and best livery stable. Then he sagged back in the seat. Mansa Obed had not spoken a dozen words to him since he'd learned of Merrill Hallwell's death, and he rode stiffly now, withdrawn and silent.

"Well, people really flock around to see you," Ham said, forcing himself to speak in a mild, conversational tone. "Just as we told you."

Obed shrugged. "When do I begin my lectures?"

Ham spread his hands and shook his head. "I don't know."

"Somebody should know, shouldn't they?" Obed inquired, voice cold.

Ham sighed. "Well, since Hallwell died, everything is changed. For the moment. Temporarily, anyhow. You can see that. We'd have to get in touch with Hallwell's church." Ham decided he'd handle this matter tactfully. He had not promised to get in touch with anybody.

"I think we'd better do that," Obed said. "Now. Today. Without delay. I don't want to waste time—nor do I want to inconvenience you any more than necessary."

"Well, now wait a minute. Maybe we can get in touch with Hallwell's church. Soon. But they are in the North.

They're up North and this is a big country. It might take some time."

"Just so we start. At once."

"Will you let me handle this? Just relax and enjoy yourself. We'll start the lectures and exhibitions. But I want to go back to my farm first. I've been a long time away and I need to see how things are going."

"And I don't want to do that."

Ham felt his face flush red. He'd never in his life permitted a black to talk to him like this. He wanted to rage out at the Negro, telling him he didn't give a damn what he wanted, that he would make the decisions, and he would tell him where they were going. He managed to control his anger and to keep his voice level. "It's all going to be all right."

Obed stared out at the narrow streets of the Vieux Carré. "I think I want to go back home. Things have changed and I wish to return to my home. On the next ship."

"Oh, to hell with that. You don't want to go back now. I tell you, it's all going to work out. . . . I told you we'd get you servants and an entourage. Where'd you think I was going to get them? I told you I have hundreds of slaves for you to choose from. Don't you want that entourage? We'll get that for you at Falconhurst."

Obed shrugged. He remained aloof and withdrawn and, most of all, suspicious. Plainly, he trusted Ham Maxwell less now than he had upon first meeting him, or during the weeks aboard the ship. The chilled remoteness in the mansa's manner, his aloofness and his open suspicions had intensified since Hallwell's death.

Ham glanced at the cold face of the mansa. Clearly, Obed did not believe Hallwell's death was accidental. He had made no charges against Ham, but he didn't have to. The suspicion crackled in the atmosphere between them.

Ham exhaled heavily. The hell with him. They were no longer in Africa, or on the high seas; they were in his home country now. No matter what the black suspected, what could he do?

"You've got to trust me," he said.

Obed did not reply. He simply gazed at Ham with that benign smile that was like an enigma. When the mansa

smiled like that, you couldn't know what he was thinking, but somehow your blood ran icy in your veins.

Obed stood aside, aloof and silent, while Ham haggled with the livery stable owner over a carriage and a team of horses.

The stable owner, as well as his workers and hangers-on, were far more interested in the strange and exotic-looking black giant than in the sale of two horses and a fringed surrey. The vehicle Ham chose to buy was large, with seats for two on the boot, a spacious tonneau, and a baggage rack in the rear. It was, as the stable man demonstrated, equipped with oilcloth curtains that could be secured in place during inclement weather. The horses Ham wanted and the pair the stable owner tried to sell him were another matter. The livery man tried to sell Ham a couple of spavined nags, until he found that the gentleman planter was knowledgeable about horseflesh. Then his whole demeanor changed. He was polite and helpful, but his attention was divided between his sale and the huge black in bright plumage near the front door. He found himself careless and bested in a pricing contest with Maxwell, and Ham came away with a deal that astonished and pleased him.

Under his breath, he swore. It was about time things were going his way. This damned Negro king had been nothing but trouble. Trouble and frustration. Ham clenched his fists at his sides. It looked like now it was just a contest between how long he could control his rages and when he blew his stopper. Well, he had to stay cool and collected. They were on their way to Falconhurst now. They had come a long way. Maybe things were going his way at last.

By now, word had spread through the streets of the French Quarter and people came running from everywhere. Shop owners, bakers, workers, and ladies of pleasure walked away from their jobs to view the excitement. No one had ever seen a man quite as tall and none of them—hell, nobody—had ever seen a black so strangely attired.

The townspeople crowded around Obed, whispering, pointing, daring to approach within arm's length to touch at him with long sticks, hoe handles, and hay forks. A kind of shiver of delicious terror raced through them when Obed, tiring of

their prodding, grabbed a pole away from a tormentor or slapped a shovel from their grasps as if they were bothersome insects.

Concluding his purchases, Ham strode to the front of the stable, where he found Obed surrounded by almost a hundred people now. One of the hostelers hitched the team to the carriage and led them into the triangle of sunlight out front.

The crowd edged closer and closer, driven by curiosity and at the same time half-frozen by terror of the unknown.

Raging, Ham shoved his way through them. He slapped away the prodders and their staffs. "Leave this heah boy alone," he said loudly. "You want to git some of you kilt? Is that what you want?"

A gasp swept across the mob. Still wild with curiosity, the crowd shifted and ebbed away slightly. They wanted to prod at this black. It was the only way they knew to find out what he was and what he might do when tormented enough. But the tone of the white man was a warning they could understand and heed. From his voice, accent, and manner, they recognized Hammond Maxwell as one of them, a man of no nonsense, and they obeyed his angry admonition, even if reluctantly.

"Is he dangerous, Mister?"

"Where-at is he from, suh?"

"Where-at you all find him?"

"What you plannin' on doin' with him?"

"Where you takin' him?"

Ham ignored the questions and the rabble. When they got too close, he shoved them brusquely aside. He stowed his bags in the rack of the newly acquired carriage. He waited, but Obed made no move to pack his own luggage. It was more than the fact that it never occurred to him to do such menial tasks. He knew what Ham expected of him and he was damned if he'd oblige the white man. "Damn you to hell," Ham said under his breath, "I ought to drive away and leave your stuff right there on the ground. That there might teach you a fuckin' lesson."

Obed continued to stare straight ahead, his mouth pulled in that faint, half-scornful smile, his gaze fixed on something above the heads of the mob.

Swearing, Ham paid the hosteler a dollar to stow Obed's gear in the rear of the carriage.

Ham said, "All right, Obed. Let's go. We got us a gyacutus long trip ahead. They's a lot of daylight; we might as well git as far as we can."

Ordinarily Ham would not pass through New Orleans without a stopover of at least three days. He called it relaxation. God knew he needed it now. He needed the pampering and luxury he found at the St. Louis Hotel, the elegant French cuisine, the imported wines, the fine cigars, the camaraderie of other plantation owners like himself. Men with whom he could drink and talk the slave trade, the prices of black males, fancy grade. But he had decided before he disembarked from the ship that he would not stay over as long as he had Obed with him. Obed was a prize worth a hell of a big fortune. There were slave pirates, auction people, adventurers who would not hesitate to make off with his prize. Well, the hell with those bastards. They would not get a chance to steal this extraordinary animal. Not this time. He would see to that.

"Let's go," Ham said, and he added, his mouth twisting savagely, "Your Majesty."

Obed shrugged and stepped toward the carriage.

"You git up front. On the boot," Ham said. "Big strappin' boy like you can handle the team with one hand. You do the driving."

Obed stopped, cold, in midstep. He turned slightly and glanced along his nose at the white man. "I don't handle horses," Obed said in his clipped, perfect English.

The rabble crowd gasped in a collective cry of awe.

"Hit talks!"

"Listen to that giant black ape. He can talk American. As good as me or you, for hell's sake."

"Wonder where in hell he come from?"

Ignoring the crowd, Obed swung up into the tonneau of the carriage. He settled himself, stiff-backed and massive, in the exact middle of the rear seat. He put his sandaled feet apart and braced his legs. Then he sat waiting while Ham, cursing inside, and quivering, taut-drawn in the pit of his belly, climbed up into the boot and took up the reins.

He slapped the leathers across the rumps of the carriage

animals and the horses lurched forward. The vehicle rolled away from the livery stable along the Vieux Carré streets, followed by a growing crowd of gawking people who would have told you they'd long ago seen everything. . . .

Ham did not relax driving through the streets north out of the town. He kept checking over his shoulder to see if they were followed.

He did not deceive himself. Sudden attacks on travelers were an accepted hazard of travel on these lonely roads. Many backcountry people resented intrusion of outsiders and killed for no better reason. Others demanded tolls from strangers crossing their territory. Thieves lurked in elder clumps. Abduction of fancy-breed blacks was a high-profit business. Auctioneers and even some planters asked no more questions than necessary these days. It was easy, quick money for highwaymen. The physical perfection and extraordinary height and build of Obed increased the dangers of assault.

As if Obed were following his line of thought, Ham said aloud, speaking across his shoulder to the king who lounged indolently in the tonneau, "And I doubt that you'd fight with me against outlaws even if we were attacked, eh?"

Obed laughed in a chilled way. "I'd have to look at them. . . . I'd want to know which of you looked most like a murderer."

Going tense, Ham slapped the reins across the rumps of the horses and said nothing. He reached down to the floor of the boot and opened a handbag. From it, he removed a handgun. He checked to be certain the rim-fire weapon was loaded. He laid it on the seat beside him.

He could not say if this added very much to his sense of security. . . .

People ran out into the streets to stare at Obed, who rode regally in the tonneau of the open carriage. Grown people stood along the curbs, shielding their eyes from the sun with their arms, gaping. They yelled, calling to their neighbors to come and see the strange sight, a huge black man in bright clothes being chauffeured by a white man. It was something to see. Something they were unlikely to see again soon. Children chased the vehicle for blocks, unwilling to give up or to drop behind the wondrous sight.

Ham was almost thankful when they drove beyond the city limits and into the wet, low marshlands; even though dangers of attack increased, they escaped the gaping mobs. The country roads were shell-covered but deeply rutted and potted by wheels and hooves and rains. Travel was slow and rough and uncomfortable. Obed was jostled on the backseat until his bones ached with the beating they took.

It seemed to Ham that the sun simply plunged precipitately down along the western horizon. They were still deep in the jungled forests at nightfall. Ham whipped the horses, hurrying them. He could not help glancing back often across his shoulder at the empty road behind them.

They drove into a small, lighted settlement stitched on the bias along a bayou stream. Most of the unpainted shacks were built on stilts against sudden flooding. The illumined ordinary seemed to be the hub of the village, lit with smoky lanterns, its hitch racks lined with saddle horses, wagons, and carts.

A pall of silence spread out like a shroud across the barroom when Ham entered with the colossal, bright-plumaged black at his heels.

Obed's nostrils quivered. He found the tavern foul-smelling, ugly, greasy, and dark enough to turn his stomach. The brown-stained walls were decorated with trophies of the hunt from the local bayous—deer heads, panther skulls, stuffed fish, and the skin of a twelve-foot alligator. The tables were thick, rough pine, with slat-bottomed chairs placed around them. Most of them were occupied by men who looked up, stunned, gaping like fly-swallowers. They stopped speaking in mid-sentence, they stopped listening to their companions, they forgot what they had been doing until this moment. As one man they fixed their gazes on the strange black giant.

"Good God a'mighty. Will you for hell's sake look at that there black buck."

"Bet he's hung like an army mule."

"With a tallywhacker like his, I bet he could even satisfy your old woman, Billy-Tom."

"Hey, Mister! What kind of clothes is your buck wearin'? He on his way to some kind of costume party?"

Ham ignored the customers and strode directly across the

dimly lit, crowded room to where a stout, aproned man stood armed with a bung starter behind the rough pine bar.

"Evenin', stranger," the stout man said. "How you comin' on?"

"I'd like rooms for the night," Ham said. "For my man and me."

The fat man snorted, peering across the bar at Ham. "Where the hell you from, Mister?"

"Why?"

"Because you ought to know niggers are not allowed to sleep in a white man's hotel."

"This man is different," Ham said. "He's a king."

"Sure he is." The innkeeper did not bother to smile. "In Africa, maybe. Or some other heathen land, he might be a king. But not here. Here in God-fearin' Louisiana, he's a nigger—and like I say, niggers don't sleep in my hotel." He shrugged. "He can sleep in the barn. We'll be glad even to shackle him for the night for you if you're scairt he'll run."

"He can't sleep in the barn." Ham spoke imperiously. He was not accustomed to being opposed by tradespeople. "Somebody might steal him." He glanced over his shoulder at the silent, watchful crowd in the barroom.

The innkeeper shrugged. "Well, I'm sorry about that, Mister. I can tell you, the next town with accommodations is ten miles from here. Either direction on that trace out there. It's a black, dangerous night for travel on these roads, and you know as well as I do, or you ought to know, when you do get there, no self-respecting tavern owner will rent lodgings to airy nigger."

Ham drew a deep breath, making the only compromise he was willing to concede. "I'll pay you double for a single room. My boy can sleep on a pad at the foot of my bed." His voice hardened. "We both know damned well that gentlemen keep their body servants with them at night—even in fine places like this."

The tavern owner laughed and shrugged. "That's up to you, Mister. This here tavern might be a fleabag to you, but it's the only one for ten miles. I got no objections to your servant sleeping in your room. I know I wouldn't allow no black in my bedroom. But if you can stand the nigger-stink, I don't give a damn."

Another brief, tense crisis arose when, after Ham had paid a double eagle for a night's lodging, the innkeeper suggested that Ham's "boy" bring in their luggage.

Wincing, Ham glanced at Obed. The big man's benign smile was fixed and thin. Looking at Obed, Ham knew better than to push him any further. This was the kind of casual insult awaiting Obed all over the South, but he realized it was new and terrible to Obed, who was accustomed to being served and deferred to. Ham exhaled heavily. As a matter of fact, he'd expected an outburst from the mansa when the tavern owner had offered to shackle Obed for the night.

Ham hastily spread coins on the bar. "Haven't you got a handyman to carry baggage?" he asked. "I think it would be better if your helper carried up our bags."

The fat man's bushy brows rose on his sloping forehead. He leaned forward, peering at Ham. "You scairt of this here nigger, Mister? I can tell you true. They ain't nothin' more dangerous than tryin' to handle a black buck when you're scairt of him and he knows you're scairt."

"The black don't live that I'm scared of," Ham said, his voice taut and low and barely controlled. He tried to smile. "It's just that Obed and me are hungry and eager to tie on the feedbag."

The tavern owner shook his head again. "Your black ain't eatin' in here, Mister."

Ham shrugged. "I figured that. He and I will eat together. In your kitchen. Ain't that where blacks usually eat?"

"My God." The innkeeper shook his head and cracked the bung starter in his palm. "You are scairt of lettin' him out of your sight, ain't you? Scairt of gettin' him stolen?"

"Let's just say, I'm taking no chances."

A slatternly white girl, mouse-colored hair loose about her face and caught in a bun at the nape of her sweated neck, in an ankle-length sack dress of printed muslin, her bare feet mud-streaked and dark with ground-in soil, prepared the meals in the kitchen. She cleared two places at the pine table near the rear door, where blacks were ordinarily fed. She moved vaguely, abstracted, after her first glimpse of the mansa Obed. She glanced at the king when he ducked his head and followed Ham through the door to the sweltering

kitchen. Her eyes widened. She stood immobile for a long breath, gazing at him until Ham told her coldly that they wished two meals served at once.

She could not take her gaze off of Obed. She placed dishes of food before them, hot grits, red beans, baked ham slices, and French bread. Ham piled his plate and, gripping his fork in his fist, began to shovel in the meal. It had been a long day. He'd worked hard, handling that new team of carriage horses. He was ravenously hungry. And, he'd been away from southern cooking for a long time. He hadn't known how hungry he was for the old familiar tastes. . . .

Obed sat unmoving at the table. He did not touch the food. He couldn't take his gaze from the stacks of greasy, food-caked dishes, pots, plates, pans, and table utensils piled in tubs of cold soapy water across the room. When the girl needed a new dish, she simply took one from this cesspool of grease and scum, rinsed it off in a discolored bucket of water, and dried it by scrubbing it against the muslin covering her buttocks. Obed was afraid he was going to be ill.

After Ham had finished gulping down second helpings of the food, he smoked a cigar, belched, and told Obed it was time to go up to bed. He sent the handyman to bed down his horses for the night, and then he and Obed followed the slattern up a rear stairwell to a second-floor room. The girl carried a smoky lamp above her head to light the way.

She opened a door to a room with a slanted ceiling and a single window overlooking the backyard and the dark horse barns and stables. The air was only barely more palatable up here than in the fetid kitchen. Obed breathed as shallowly as possible.

The girl stood in the middle of the room, waiting.

"You gentlemen can leave the window open if you want to," she said. "Though it gets mighty damp and humid here in the bayous at night."

She set the lamp on a table near the bed. Then she looked up at Obed, her face oddly rigid and pallid. "If'n you git hungry during the night. Or if you want anything, I'll be down in the kitchen."

Ham stared at the girl, incredulous. A southern white woman, even white trash like this, practically inviting a black

man to a tryst was unheard of. Times were changing. What in the hell was this world coming to?

Obed smiled and thanked the girl, but something in his face revealed he saw her with that same stomach-turning sense with which he'd viewed the stacks of grimy dishes in cold greasy water, or the days-old mud caked at her ankles.

She handed Ham the key and backed away across the room. She leaned against the door-facing a moment, staring up at Obed, and then she went out, closing the door behind her.

Ham walked over and locked it. "Well, we got to git an early start in the morning," Ham said. "You best bed down on that pad there and we'll try to get some sleep."

He heard the sharp way in which the king inhaled in the silent room. Obed's voice was cold, his thin smile unchanging, unchangeable. He shook his head. "I'm going to sleep in the bed. I won't sleep on the floor. You know that."

Rage gorged up in Ham from the taut drawn pit of his belly. His hand slapped at the gun in his coat pocket. His mind threw up all the images of frustration and anger that had haunted his day. He swallowed back at the bile hot in his throat.

It took some minutes, some violent struggle of will against outrage, but he was able to compose himself, get his temper under control at last. He shook out the pallet on the floor and lay down on it, raging inwardly. He could not remove his boot from his game leg, and this added to his frustration and wrath. He could not ask the king to help him. He could ask, but he knew what the answer would be. The black son of a bitch.

By this time Obed was already stretched out across the full length of the rope-slung mattress. He lay, arms folded across his chest, a faint smile tugging at his mouth.

XVI

When Ham recognized familiar landmarks and knew they were nearing Falconhurst, he felt relief and a thrill of victory. It had been a long journey, but it was almost over; he was nearly home and he had won. He had what he wanted.

It was an exhausting run north and east from the Delta. He had been tense, constantly on guard. He had become as nervous about the silent and surly Obed as he was about highwaymen. Obed spoke only when spoken to, and when he did say something, it was usually a command of some kind.

They had passed through a hundred hamlets and towns of considerable size and large populations. People in every town ran out to gawk at the strange sight: an open carriage, with a white man handling the lines and a brilliantly garbed black lounging in the tonneau, like a king, for God's sake. They shouted questions, yelled insults, made threats. But mostly they stared, open-mouthed.

They progressed slowly but steadily. The leisurely pace fatigued Ham more than a more rapid one might have. He remained tense, drawn, and watchful. More than once Ham was tempted to grab up the handgun from the boot seat beside him and blow the Negro's brains out. But he kept his temper controlled. He had his prize. God knew he had it, and nobody was going to take it away from him. He was not going to make any fool mistakes, either.

He drove more relentlessly than he ordinarily would have. When he had headed up coffles in the past, to New Orleans or Natchez, or made trips for pleasure, he had paused often along the way. The beautiful old mansions that sat back from

the roads offered surcease, gossip, a drink or two, or even a bed for the night. He was unwilling to delay this time. He wanted food and the companionship of hospitable white people, even the rest of one night in a comfortable bed on clean sheets. But it would be a waste of time, of daylight, of security. He was not going to feel totally safe until he was back home at Falconhurst.

When they drove past High Tower, Ham almost cried out in his pleasure. They were almost home. This abandoned plantation of old Ezra Hightower was one of the first signs Ham always found, returning home. He wondered that heirs had not claimed the huge place. It had been allowed to fall into disrepair, weeds, and dilapidation.

At the sight of this landmark Hammond's heart beat faster in its ribcage. He had been away for months. In ways it seemed years since he'd seen this rich green countryside. Now homing aroused in him even more than emotions of pleasure and excitement. He belonged here. From this soil he'd been made and he felt a terrible kinship with it. He belonged and it belonged to him. They passed the turnoff of Seven Mile Road which led past the Widow Johnson's old house. The Falconhurst trace lay straight ahead. Ham swallowed back the lump in his throat. There was more than homecoming stirring inside him. He was returning like a hunter from the trek. He had his trophy. A kind of elation swept through him, making him dizzy with the sense of victory. A perfect Mandingan. He had done everything he had to do to get this prized black, and soon he would be back home with his king of Mandingans.

Before Hammond reached the old gateposts at Falconhurst, a half-dozen little black boys raced out into the trace screaming and yelling out their delight at the sight of their master.

The children ran alongside the carriage, screaming with delight and staring awed at the brightly clad man in the tonneau.

"Massa's a-coming. Massa's a-coming home," the children screamed like trumpeters. They ran beside the carriage yelling at the tops of their voices. The sounds carried in the silence and before the vehicle reached the house, blacks were converging from every direction.

"Massa Ham!"

"Hit Massa Ham. He done come home."

Ham laughed, calling out to them. "How are you all? How's everybody comin' on? Masta Warren all right?"

"Massa Warren, he jes' fine, Massa-suh," a black field hand called, his teeth showing in a delighted smile. Ham knew the black likely had no more knowledge about the master of Falconhurst than Ham himself. But in this festive moment, such details had no importance.

By the time Ham had driven the carriage all the way to the wide slab steps to the front porch, scores of blacks had gathered from the quarters, the barns, the fields, and from the house itself. It was a kind of outpouring of smiling black faces, of adoring people who shouted the good news at one another, patted one another on the back. The young master was home. Young master had come back.

Ham leaped down from the carriage, elated, pleased. Young blacks, from six to sixteen, some of them almost white, with Caucasian features, clutched at him, weeping out their pleasure.

Obed remained where he sat in the carriage. He stared in disbelief at this "southern mansion" Hammond Maxwell had boasted of all these months, since the moment they met, in fact.

Obed stared around, nostrils flaring as if he smelled something that offended him. Compared to many of the old homes they had seen in New Orleans, and sitting back from the roads north, this was nothing more than an ugly old farmhouse. It occurred to Obed that his own chateau inside that Senegalese compound was far more elegant.

He let his unawed gaze move over the unpainted structure, the barns and outbuildings and the blacks who still came running in all directions as if they truly were pleased to see this white man who enslaved, sold, and bound them.

His thin smile hardened. Hammond Maxwell's was the only white face in this sea of Negroes. For a moment Obed could have believed he was back home in Africa. But he admitted that though Hammond's was the only white face, it was the center of all attention, of loving gazes. The blacks came forward shyly to greet him, and the white man waited to smile and touch each of them in turn. The blacks bowed and smiled when they came before their master. Obed stared at

them in disbelief. Why were they such cattle, such imbeciles? Why did they submit, hundreds of them, to a single white slave owner like this?

It didn't make sense. Obed wanted to yell at them, to rouse himself to his full height and shout with the strength of his great voice, to make them listen, to make them see that they were enslaved, not because of this puny white man and others like him, but because of themselves, because they allowed themselves to be enslaved.

Lucretia Borgia had heard the commotion, and she came running through the house, the front door slamming behind her. When she saw her master, Hammond Maxwell, she began to wail aloud, so all eyes on the porch and in the sun-stricken yard turned upon her.

Lucretia Borgia's delight knew no bounds, and her hysteria was beyond her control. She was laughing and sobbing in the same breath, her hands clawing wildly at the air as she reached out for her beloved master even before she got to him. Her statuesque body quivered as she propelled herself down the wide slab steps and out onto the graveled driveway.

"Kindly Gawd in heaven!" Miz Lucretia Borgia was barely able to gasp out the words. It was as if she were overcome with extreme pleasure and would have fallen had she not caught the slender man in both her arms, weeping over him. "Lord a-mercy. It Massa Hammond hisself. My own sweet Massa Hammond. Praise the Lawd, it my Massa Hammond what's come home at last." She kept clutching at Ham's shoulders as if to reassure herself it was not another futile dream. "It is you, Massa Hammond? It is you come home to us?"

"Sho' 'nuf, Lucretia Borgia. Lord, you can pinch me an' you don't believe it's me." She was sobbing so that she could not answer him. She could only cling to him as he tried to move toward the steps. She enclosed him in a fierce embrace that almost squeezed the breath out of him. Nor would she release her death grip on him before he reached the steps and started up them.,

"Yo' home, Massa. Yo' done come home. Oh, happiest of days, the good Lord has brung my Massa Hammond back home."

He kissed her cheek lightly and shook free of her grasping arms. "Yes, Lucretia Borgia, I is home. I as glad to be heah as you are to see me. Whure-at is Papa? Where's Ellen? Where's little Sophie?"

"I's here, Massa." Mem spoke from the slick-pole upright near the head of the steps. He straightened himself with difficulty, assuming a ramrod stiffness that he hoped would conceal the fact that he had been drinking, not just today, but steadily since his master had departed this place, months ago. "I's glad to see you too."

Hammond stopped on the top step. His mouth twisted and for a moment he looked as if he might backhand the drunken butler across the face. He desisted only because it was a bright moment of homecoming. But anybody could see Mem had more than a touch of the blacksnake due him, the shiftless bastard. "Yeah. Yo' glad to see me. You also so drunk you don't know where you are."

Mem smiled, reeling slightly. "I know where I is, Massa. I greetin' my sweet massa home."

Miz Lucretia Borgia stepped quickly between them. "Heah's little Miss Sophie, Massa Hammond. Your own sweet little Miss Sophie. See how she growed since you was away? She growin' like a little weed."

Ham knelt and the cross-eyed little girl with the red-flaxen hair and dime-size freckles came shyly into his arms. "Hello, Papa. Did you have a good time? Did you bring me something?"

Ham hugged his daughter in an almost casual way. He did not bother to answer her, but stood up and looked around at the faces gathered on the shaded porch. "Where's Ellen?"

The lovely girl stepped forward from the wall, where she stood in a group of servants. "I heah, Massa. Welcome home."

Ham gave her a warm smile and then looked away, his face slightly flushed. Miz Lucretia was not yet ready to end her moment of ecstasy. She clung to Ham's arm, pouring out the news of the farm, the sales of blacks, the births, and the matings she'd arranged. Ham barely heard her. He kept looking around. "Whure-at's Papa. Papa's all right, ain't he?"

Miz Lucretia Borgia tightened her grip on his arm. "Course

he's all right, Massa Hammond. You know I takes good care of Massa Warren. Ain't gonna let nothin' happen to him."

"Know you ain't," Ham said in a distracted way. "Whure-at is Papa?"

"Massa Warren been feelin' kin'ly poorly with the bone-ache an' all. He sat in by the fire. Say he see you in there alone when you get home. He jes' like me and all the rest of us, we jus' can't no way believe you is home, Massa Hammond."

She stopped speaking abruptly. Her gaze moved past Ham's shoulder to the brightly clad young black giant standing, legs apart in the sunlight, near the wagon. He was surrounded by curious, awed blacks, but his gaze, cold and furious, was fixed on her.

Miz Lucretia Borgia felt a surge of dismay flood through her at the chilled contempt she saw in that handsome face. She could not think why a stranger would hate her so furiously at first sight. But she could not really concentrate on his hatred. She had never seen a more beautiful male human being in all her waking lifetime, and not even in her most fevered sleeping fantasy. He was godlike. Nobody had to tell her he was a Mandingo. She knew Master Hammond's preference for these perfect specimens. She had thought Mede incredibly handsome, but compared to this strange man, Mede had been like a young boy, not yet complete.

She winced, letting her gaze fall away under Obed's unyielding stare. A sense of emptiness flooded through her.

Ham entered the overheated, vaguely lighted parlor alone. He closed the door.

He saw his father struggle to stand up, and he hurried across the room to him. He was aware of the crackling of the logs in the fireplace, the rumbling mumble of black voices from the gallery and the yard. Mostly, he was aware of his father's ailing and his aging. God almighty, his father looked ten years older than he had when Ham left here. "Don't you git up, Pa," he said. "Don't you no way stir yo'self. I home now."

He sank to his knee beside his father's chair, sticking out his game leg awkwardly beside him. He caught his father's

frail body in his arms and embraced him fiercely. He kissed the older man full on the mouth, holding him for some moments.

When he released his father, Warren was sobbing aloud. He'd burst into tears when he caught the first sight of his son coming toward him through that doorway. Now he could no longer hold back the flood of joyous weeping. "Oh, thank Gawd," he said. "Thank the holy Gawd what heard my prayers every night since you been away from here."

"I'm home now, Papa. It's all going to be fine."

But Warren could not stop crying. "You don't understand, son. I thought you'd gone out to the Texies. Gone west to stay. I tried to tell myself a hundred times a day, but hit didn't do nary bit of good. I knowed in my heart you'd done gone off to the Texies, like you said months ago you meant to do. I was afeared I'd never see yo' dear face on this earth again."

"Didn't go to the Texies, Pa. Not this time. Didn't go nowhere near them Texies."

"Thank Gawd. Thought sure you'd gone out there."

Ham laughed. "Been farther, Pa." He went on holding on to his parent. "Much farther. Went to Africa, Pa. Went all the way to Africa, to find myself the perfect Mandingan. . . . And I found one this time, Pa. . . . He's a little strange in the head, maybe. Talks about he's a king and better 'an airy other nigger, better even than white people. But Gawd almighty, he's a perfect specimen. He worth a fortune to you and me."

"I want you to have whatever it is that you enjoy, son. I too old now for planning to raise Mandingans. But I proud and happy for you."

Ham laughed again. "I know you truly will be, Pa, when you see him."

Warren sighed, looking about the dimly lit room. "Where'd you git this prize black?"

"Like I say, Pa. Went all the way to Africa. By ship. Weeks." He went into detail of the arduous trek, the travel overland to Charleston, the ship east to Dakar, the unbelievable trip up the Senegal River, the land where Mandingans lived, hundreds of them, thousands of them. Like blacks, like Berbers, like Moors, and more perfect than any of them. He told his father about the compound where the Mandingan king

had lived, the way they had used wiles and tact and promises to lure the king himself to come downriver and board a ship. "He come over here with his head full of the damn-fool idea he's going to be lecturing to thousands of white people—all over the United States. On the evils of slavery, for God's sake." Ham laughed and shook his head. "Well, they's one thing I can tell you, Pa. And that Mandingo devil. He can get that fool idea out'n his head right now."

Warren smiled and nodded his approval. He approved of anything his son did, and his happiness was a thousandfold because, now that Ham had a new Mandingan to replace the slain Mede, Ham would be content at Falconhurst. He would get the idea of going away to Texas out of his mind. The father was happy about this. His heart swelled until it felt as if it might burst. Nothing else mattered except his son was back home. Back home to stay.

Warren looked over Ham's head. "An' your fat friend. That abolitionist preacher, that Mr. Merrill Hallwell?"

Ham sighed. "Accident. Mr. Hallwell had hisself an accident. It was fatal."

"That's too bad; you set quite a store by that man. Though I myself never could quite understand it."

"He was a help to me, Pa. I couldn't of done what I've done without him. But never set no store by him. Never believed his fool preachin's about abolition any more than you."

Warren exhaled in relief. "What happened to the poor fellow?"

Ham straightened and stood up. He massaged at the prickly feelings in his game leg. "Mr. Hallwell fell overboard one night. Far out in the Atlantic. On the return trip. Just drank too many toddies. Or something. Somebody saw him fall. Never recovered the body."

Warren shrugged. "Don't figure that to be too much of a loss to this old world."

"No, sir." Ham nodded without smiling. "That's just the way I feel about it too. . . ."

XVII

Leaning heavily upon Ham's arm, old Warren limped out to the crowded front gallery to view the latest Negro acquisition of his son's. His sore and bruised feet ached, they were liver-colored, the toes twisted by rheumatism. He dreaded getting so far from the restorative heat of the roaring fire. Wind chill, even on a hot day, seemed to chew at his flesh. Jesus, he hated to get old. It seemed ironic as hell that this was what a man worked all his life for, aching bones and knotted belly. But the more Ham talked about the new Mandingo, telling how they'd found him, ruler of his own tribe far up some distant African river, the more eager Warren became to see for himself. At last he could resist no longer; the dream of a perfect Mandingo had been in his own heart as long as he could remember. It was just that it was intensified and inflamed in Ham. It was more than a dream with his beloved son. It was a driving obsession, a dominating influence the father could clearly understand.

When the two men came slowly through the front door onto the porch, a brief, respectful silence settled over the slaves crowded in the yard. Warren reeled toward his cane-backed rocking chair and toppled heavily into it. Miz Lucretia Borgia ran, spreading a hand-quilted blanket over his knees and tucking it in around him.

Warren squinted against the brazen sunglow after his long stay in the half-dark parlor. When he saw the Mandingan standing at the foot of the steps, Warren's heart faltered.

The aging man felt stunned, almost as if he'd been pole-axed, except the sensation was overwhelming pleasure and not pain. His son had not lied or even exaggerated.

The Negro stood, his head erect, his shoulders back, his legs in some flimsy pantaloons, set firmly apart. He looked regal, regal as hell. He was not one with those other blacks; he stood apart from them as the sun is different from reflecting stars. He seemed to fill all the space of the yard. The land around him did not seem vast enough to give him scope. He seemed ready to bound like an attacking lion, to charge like some Arabian stallion of perfect bloodline. Warren was conscious of his own age, weakness, and infirmity contrasted with the youth and vigor of the Negro. One other thing impressed Warren in that first scrutiny: the faint challenging smile about the Mandingan's eyes and mouth. It was a gentle smile, and yet in many ways it was not a smile at all.

"I never in all my born days seed anything like it," Warren whispered, mostly to himself. A kind of flooding of his own life passed across his eyes. He had learned about Mandingoes at his own father's knee. He had grown up, wild with the desire to own and to breed the strain. Like Ham, he had dreamed of having the finest Mandingoes, the hell with the cost. But time was a hellish master; time seemed to race; he had the farm to run, a wife to care for, a son to teach, and suddenly he was old, and only his dream remained forever young. He saw himself buying Big Pearl and her mother Lucy from the Coign plantation. Later, Ham had bought Mede from the ancient master of the Coign, Mr. Wilson. But finding Mandingo wenches was almost impossible; they'd ended up breeding Mede to Lucy, his own mother; the drop had been the mentally retarded giant Ole Mr. Wilson.

He had made mistakes, terrible mistakes, but we are all guilty of being too driven, too filled with desire to worry about caution. Well, his wrongs were in the past, the dream was with Ham now, but with this latest find he was certain of one thing. That dream of the perfect Mandingan would not die.

Warren leaned forward in his chair staring down at the Mandingan poised in the sunlight. It was as if the youth drew all light, as if it struck him and was deflected, so the people around him stood in shadows. Warren ached with pleasure and anticipation. Here was the Mandingan the old man had dreamed of back when he still dreamed.

Warren saw that the black youth's skin was not a dead

ebony, but a deep warm brown, the skin tones of the Berbers or the Moors. His eyes were wide-spaced, alert and intelligent, without any hint of that yellow that spoiled so many otherwise perfect blacks. His forehead was high, his features chiseled as if from some ancient bronze. The bridge of his nose was high but not thick at all, the wide nostrils were hewn cleanly above his large full-lipped mouth and squared jaw. But it was the body that astounded the slave breeder. The arms were massive, rippling with muscles. The chest was keglike, the belly flat, the hips narrowed, the muscular legs rugged and long.

There was such barbaric size and primitive strength that it inspired an awe, a sense of fear. And about the Mandingan there was such an air of confidence, and a lack of timidity toward anything on God's earth, that he could smile in a contemptuous and benignant way upon the rest of the world, black or white. He needed no outside defense against man or animal, he was strong in himself, and secure.

"Boy. You." Warren lifted his voice and addressed the youth who gazed at him with casual disinterest from the yard. "Yes. You. What's your name? Obed? Come up here."

Obed drew a deep breath, tempted to refuse. Let the old one come down to him. Then the sense of the ridiculous rescued Obed again. Here was a frail and infirm old white man who could be ripped, like papyrus, with one hand, speaking as if he ruled the world. Well, maybe the diseased old one did rule this place, but what troubled and amused Obed most, at the same time, was why the young and healthy blacks permitted it.

His tongue implanted firmly within his cheek, Obed bounded up the wide slab steps, trying to show the ill white man his strength and power against the white man's terrible infirmities. Obed sighed. It was the liver-colored flesh of the man's bare feet that sickened him most of all; it was like some livid malignancy.

Warren gazed up at the Mandingo youth. But when he spoke, it was across his shoulder to his own son. Warren knew the pleasure both of them experienced in this moment. He knew the soul-stirring delight Hammond took from owning so magnificent an animal. He himself had been a breeder

of blacks all his life, and he was speechless with appreciation of the beauty and perfection. He said in a hoarse whisper, "He's all you said he is, Hammond. He's a real and perfect Mandingan."

"Knew you'd be partial," Ham said. "Knowed you'd admire him. All these weeks I been hurrying back here so you could look him over."

"Hit's a thrill of a lifetime," Warren said in an awed tone. "It's a sight a man gits to see once in his life. If'n he's born lucky and has a relapse, that is, he is witness to such perfection."

Though they spoke to each other, talking about Obed and not to him, as if he could not understand what they were saying, the mansa was at least flattered by the open admiration in their faces and their voices.

"You can't waste this here one," Warren said. "Not like you wasted poor Mede."

"Don't mean to, Papa."

"You got to move fast. You got to git some Mandingo women to mate him with. Don't do no good to breed a Mandingan with lesser tribes. We already know you don't no way git perfection. You git a mule. Or another Ole Mr. Wilson. I has learned these Mandingans should not be bred closer than first or second cousin. Anything closer is too much. Like breedin' poor ole Mede to his own mother. But now you git some perfect Mandigan dams to breed this stud to, you'll git a line that ought to stun the world."

Ham nodded. "I mean to do that, Pa. But I figured to start him out with Big Pearl. Ought to git a likely drap from that, so we ain't wastin' his gizzem whilst I market for dams."

Warren sighed. "Maybe Old Lucy ain't too old for childbearin'."

But Ham shook his head. "I done thought about that, Pa. After Lucy drappin' Ole Mr. Wilson, I ain't taking no more chances on her."

"But, son, it ain't the same. Ole Mr. Wilson was Mede's drop out'n his own mother. I know now that's interbreedin' too close to home. I wouldn't never make that mistake no more."

"Well, don't you fret. We'll find us some real young healthy Mandingo dams. . . . After all I been through to git this boy, cost for dams ain't no barrier."

Obed said in a cold, flat tone, "I want to go back home. I am ready to go home now."

Warren's head jerked up. "You shut up, boy," he said in a savage tone. "You speak when you're spoken to. That's the first goddamn lesson you got to learn here, if it wears out a dozen whips to teach you."

Obed hissed, drawing in his breath. Ham spoke rapidly, "It's all right, Papa. Obed ain't used to our ways yet."

"Well, by God, it's time he got used to them. You teach a wild stallion who is boss, you break him fast, or you got trouble."

"It's all right, Papa. It just take a little time, that's all. This here boy was king in the country he come from."

Warren stared up at Obed, his eyes narrowed and glittering with savagery. "Well, he ain't in no African jungle now. He at Falconhurst. An' at Falconhurst, there ain't but one king, and that's me."

"All right, Papa. All right."

Warren was not reconciled, but he put the matter from his mind at the moment. There were other more important considerations. Soundness of body and limb was not a real condition with this boy, but Warren longed to run exploratory hands over the massive shoulders, arms, and pap muscles. Warren knew black perfection when he saw it; no tactile examination was required, but he wanted to confirm his first appraisal with his hands. He got a sense of satisfaction and certainty from direct contact with slave flesh. And deep inside, he almost believed that such strength and vigor and beauty might be contagious. Mayhap his twisted body could be revived by absorbing through touch some of the attributes of the perfect Mandingan.

"Come here, boy," Warren said to Obed. "I wants to finger you."

Ham looked from his father to the black man. He realized the pleasure Warren would get from caressing such a magnificent animal, but he also knew the terrible pride and stubbornness of this black animal. This didn't seem the time or place yet for the confrontation he knew must come between them.

But before he could speak, Obed laughed. "Why not, old man? You get your pleasure from that?"

"You black son of a bitch, don't you talk to me like that."

"Then you watch your own tongue, watch how you talk to me, old man." Obed was aware of the sharp gasp of horror from the slaves at his words. They seemed to retreat a step, as one, even those farthest from the porch.

"I see it going to take plenty of the blacksnake to bring you in line," Warren said. "But I willin'. We got big bucks with strong backs and leather whips and nothin' but time. You want to be smart, you'll drap your pants and let me inspect you."

Obed stared at the old man, his eyes glittering with savage laughter. He looked around at the hundreds of slaves, standing, awed, waiting, barely breathing. His gaze narrowed on the statuesque Lucretia Borgia. He peered at her for some moments and then he shrugged. "You want me naked, why not?"

"Tha's better," Warren said. "You learn to do what I tell you, jump fast when I speak, and you git along a lot better."

Obed peered at the old man as if torn between a desire to humor the old bastard for the hell of it and breaking his neck as he would snap a spent matchstick. He caught the waistband of his pantaloons and peeled them downward over his sculpted hips, thighs, and calves. When the cloth spilled about his ankles, he calmly stepped out of it and shrugged out of his colorful shirt.

His shoulders back, Obed stood unselfconsciously naked. The onlookers gasped, black and white alike. Miz Lucretia Borgia licked the tip of her tongue across her lips and stepped forward, her black eyes round with curiosity. Memnon stared at the mansa's genitals and whimpered slightly, his eyes filling with tears.

"My God a'mighty," Warren whispered. "Will you look at that there buck? Never seen nothin' like that, 'ceptin' on a horse. This here boy is built like a jackass, I do swear. Never seen airy other black boy so heavy hung. Not in all my life of breedin' blacks . . . Have to be careful what dam you breed this one to. He could tear up most women. Yes sir, he could screw some women and they never be the same again."

Obed stood unmoving, the rage building inside him. His stomach was taut, as if steel wires were being tightened at

every breath. These white bastards, they let him stand naked while they discussed him as though he were an animal.

These sons of bitches! Who did they think they were, these all-powerful white-skinned jackals! Which of these two was a real man? What were they? Puny, ugly, malformed, tight-shouldered, pot-bellied, with scrawny legs and knobby knees, and liver-colored feet to sicken the eyes. They strode about like proud apes, white-skinned and boastful, beating their skinny chests with their fists, but empty and unhealthy inside. Were they jealous of the virility and strength of black men? How could they lord it over strong men who could break their backs with ease? Since the murder of the abolitionist preacher aboard the *Eagle of the Sea,* he had suspected that Hammond Maxwell meant to keep none of his pledges. Standing naked before the two white men, he was overcome with sick hatred.

"I said, come here, boy," Warren repeated, his voice lashing.

At last, that fiercely controlled smile of inner fury twisting his mouth, Obed stepped close to the old man's chair.

"Tha's better," Warren said. "Mayhap you learn, after all. You behave yo'self an' nobody hurts you. You understand, boy?"

Obed simply stared down at him, smiling, but unspeaking.

Warren's sun-leathered face reddened slightly, but he spoke in a coldly controlled way. "Kneel down in front of me, boy," he ordered. "No, not that a-way. Your back to me."

Obed turned and knelt with his back to the slave dealer. He fixed his gaze upon the tops of far tupelo trees as the older Maxwell explored the muscles of his back and legs with experienced hands. Without bothering to speak, Warren pushed the mansa forward so he toppled on his hands and knees, face to the floor. He spread the cheeks of the king's muscled buttocks and examined the anus for any signs of hemorrhoids. Abruptly then, he thrust the third finger of his right hand as far as possible up the kneeling man's rectum. Obed gasped, lunged forward, and stood up, his eyes blazing. "That's enough," he said. "You have had your game. No more."

Warren ignored Obed's tone and called to a black boy to fetch a small stick from the yard. Eagerly the child ran up the steps with the scrap of lumber. Warren patted the boy on the

head and then threw his arm back and threw the stalk as far into the crowded yard as he was able. Then he looked up at Obed and ordered, "Fetch it, boy. Bring me the stick."

"You want that stick, old man. You go get it yourself," Obed said.

"Go fetch," Warren said. "And move fast. Want to see how you move. Now, fetch."

Obed stood unmoving, the fierce black eyes clashing against the faded blue. The slaves poised, taut, silent. Ham stepped forward, sick and empty-bellied. Short of killing the Mandingo, he saw no other way to resolve this terrible battle of wills.

"Hit all right, Papa," Ham said. "The boy is new at this. He learn. It take time, Papa."

"You stay out of this. He gonna stay on my farm, he gonna learn to jump when I speak, or he gits the whip till he bleeds. Now, what will it be, boy? You fetch me that stick, or you want me to order you whupped to bleedin'?"

"You do what you want to about the whips, old man," Obed said. "But if you want that fucking stick, I suggest you go get it yourself."

"Whip him!" Warren screeched. He came half out of his chair. "I want this rascal whupped I don't care if you whup him to death. You whup him till he learns never to talk like that no more."

That first day at home was far from the hopeful experience Ham had anticipated for so long. It took a long time, but he managed to soothe his father's ruffled feathers. He kept saying over and over that it was too early, the time was not right, the older man had to trust him. They were not dealing with an ordinary Negro, and ordinary methods would not suffice. They could cover the Mandingo's back with wales and scars, but this would only ruin him and might not have the desired results. Sometimes blacks, especially the proud ones, like the Mandingans or the Fullahs, reverted to the bush at what they considered cruel treatment, and they were lost forever. Let them be patient; let him work with Obed as long as possible.

Warren cursed, standing up unsteadily. Memnon caught his arm and kept him from losing his balance. "Think you're making a fearful mistake, son, I do." He shook his head, his

taut mouth gray. "I've trained a lot of niggers in my life, and I learned you don't train 'em nothin' lettin' them git away with something like this."

Ham nodded, trying to smile. He jerked his head, telling Obed to get dressed. "We have to do it my way, Papa," he said. "Hit the only way I know. Now, I've give it a lot of thought all these weeks."

"If'n the black son kills you in your bed," Warren said, "don't blame me. Don't say I didn't warn you. A bad nigger is worse'n airy rattlesnake, and a bad Mandingo is like a wild panther."

Leaning on Memnon's arm, he stared at Obed for a moment, a cold glance full of threats, then he turned and limped across the porch. The front door slammed behind him.

Ham looked up at Obed. He spoke quietly. "My father has his ways, Obed. Just as you have yours. He's ruled this place absolutely for a hell of a lot longer than you've been king of your tribe. You might want to remember that."

Dressed, Obed spoke in a tone that matched the white man's. "You and your father," he said, "need have no trouble with me. Get me back to New Orleans. Put me on a ship for Africa. You'll have no trouble with me. Otherwise . . ." He shrugged, his gaze striking against Ham's, and holding.

"We'll see," Ham said in that same flat tone. "We'll see."

With a dozen slaves in their wake, Ham walked with Obed and Lucretia Borgia across the barnyard and into the slave quarters.

Ham limped, conscious more than anything else of a physical and mental fatigue. He felt dead tired. It had been a long trek, a time of tension without rest, and cruel labor handling that team of horses on vicious back trails. He wanted to lie down and recover some of his old strength and drive. He wanted to bed down with Ellen; he wanted to sleep around the clock. He wanted to realize that he was home again, back at Falconhurst, where he was master. He'd be all right then, once he'd rested. But he knew he had at least one chore before he could be free to relax. Somehow he had to buy at

least temporary contentment for Obed on this farm. The mansa was an alien in this land and Ham couldn't believe he would dare to run away in a hostile country, but with this Mandingan you could not be sure. It seemed to Ham that if he could get Obed's mind at ease, his attention diverted from his wish to return home, they could get through the night at least. At the moment he hoped for nothing more than this.

He limped beside Lucretia Borgia, silent and indrawn. One truth he had learned in dealing all his life with black studs. They hated fiercely, with white heat, but they forgot quickly. A white man could hate forever, but a black one could not. And one thing diverted a black stud's mind from his woes and his hatreds better than anything else: a black hussy to bed down. He was gambling the mansa was no different.

In fact, it seemed all the odds were on his side. He remembered he had seen thirty wives and concubines in Obed's compound up the Senegal River. Obed was the healthiest buck Ham had ever seen. He was betting he was also the randiest. If he could get Obed bedded down with some willing wench, they could all relax for a little while and, if the hussy were Mandingan, the mating might pay off with a profitable drop.

Ham led the way up the step to the stoop of Miz Lucy's cabin. All the slave houses were spotless, scrubbed and scoured, but none was as clean and polished as Miz Lucy's. Two huge Mandingo women lived in this shack, women with incredible energy and nowhere to spend it. They swept and cleaned all day and all hours at night.

Ole Mr. Wilson opened the door. At the sight of the huge, retarded youth, Obed hesitated, withdrawing. But the giant was gentle and smiling. Miz Lucy sent the boy out the back door to play with a group of children. Obed was relieved to see him go. It was easy to see what kind of inbreeding had produced this helpless monster.

Miz Lucy and Big Pearl were almost overcome with pleasure at being visited by the master and the new Mandingan. Miz Lucy gushed profusely over all of them, except Miz Lucretia Borgia. The two women were old enemies, and Miz Lucy ignored the servant woman as if she were not present. Miz Lucretia merely smiled, folding her arms beneath her apron.

She could hardly keep her admiring gaze off the mansa. Miz Lucy and Big Pearl were as affected, simpering and stealing glances at him while they tried to fawn over the white master. Their behavior made Obed sick at his stomach.

He looked around the room. His gaze touched at the gray skull, a centerpiece on the mantel at the fieldstone hearth. Miz Lucy followed his gaze. She spoke proudly, "That's my son," she said. "Mede. He was a handsome man. Like you, sir."

"Never mind that," Ham said. He did not want to think about Mede. "I was hoping maybe you had room here so that Obed could stay with you and Big Pearl for a while."

Miz Lucy looked ready to weep at this signal honor for which she had been chosen. "Oh, we'd be most proud to have Mansa Obed as our guest. We might need us another bed, Massa. We short a bed since Mede's was moved out."

Ham smiled broadly. "I was thinking more about Obed bedding down with Big Pearl," he said.

Big Pearl gasped and trembled, terribly flustered and instantly excited. Big Pearl was the gem of Falconhurst, and she knew it. The color of burnished copper, strong and straight, she was as magnificent a pureblooded Mandingo as lived in this country. She was well built, nicely proportioned, but beautiful in the way a cathedral is beautiful. She was the plantation showpiece and Ham had had her in mind as the dam for breeding with Obed ever since he'd started home with his prize. In many ways, he thought, Big Pearl was like the mansa. She was afraid of neither man nor the devil, and yet she was as docile as a dove. She delighted in being stripped and paraded before dozens of black buyers, handled and haggled over, knowing that all offers for her were going to be rejected by her masters. She stared now at Obed and trembled. It was as if the heavens had opened and her wildest prayers and most heated fantasies had been answered.

Miz Lucy giggled. "Bed down with Big Pearl, eh? Well, that shore is fine with me. And I know Big Pearl be most happy to accommodate our guest."

"Ah, that's fine." Ham could barely restrain a helpless yawn of fatigue. "Well, we jus' leave you here, Obed. An' we see you in the mawnin'."

Obed stared at him. He shook his head. "I won't stay here," he said.

Big Pearl moaned and then wept aloud, the sound gushing from her in a helpless torrent of disappointment and despair.

"Now, look at that," Ham raged. "Now you done made Big Pearl cry. She tries to be nice and you hurt her. What the hell's the matter with you? What do you want?"

"I told you. I want to go back home," Obed said in a regal tone. "I am sorry if I have distressed you, Pearl. You are a lovely young girl and at any other time I would find you most attractive. It has nothing to do with you."

"Then what in the hell is the matter?" Ham demanded. His patience was in frazzles now. Like his father, he began to think in terms of whips and chains.

"I am a king," Obed reminded Ham. "I will not sleep in a cabin. You have better rooms in the big house. I'll stay there, or nowhere."

Miz Lucretia Borgia followed Ham and Obed into the front doorway at the big house. Secretly, she was smiling. She was not pleased that Obed had overcome her master in a contest of wills in that cabin down there. She wisely could see this led nowhere except to pain and torment for the misguided black man. But she had felt a surge of jealousy at the thought that Obed would bed down with Big Pearl. She understood Master Ham's reasoning. It was common sense that would have guided her if it were her decision. Big Pearl was a perfect Mandingan, so was Obed. Of all the females on the stud farm, Big Pearl was the ideal mate for the mansa. Still, she was glad it had not happened. She did not think she could have slept tonight, lying on her third-floor cot and thinking about Obed bedding down with Big Pearl in Miz Lucy's hateful cabin.

"All right," Ham said, as if biting off each word, when they were in the front hallway of the old house. "You take Obed up to the third floor and find him a cot, Lucretia Borgia."

"The third floor?" Obed inquired in a polite but cold tone.

"The third floor. If you gonna stay in this house, it be the third floor. That's where niggers sleep in this house."

"It's the servants quarters," Miz Lucretia Borgia said. "It where-at I sleep, Your Majesty."

"It won't do," Obed said. "I will choose my room."

Ham raged inwardly. He felt the fatigue burned out of his body by the fire of inner fury. All he could think was that the moment had arrived for Obed to be put forever in his place. No matter what Obed thought he was, he was a Negro, a black, and no better than the lowliest field hand out in those cabins. He would be taught that, but for the moment, for tonight, Ham decided to go along with him.

They climbed the stairs to the vaguely lighted upper hallway, Memnon now leading the way. At the head of the stairway Obed paused, gazing at the closed doors. "That room," he said, nodding toward a door.

"My father sleeps there," Ham said.

"And that one." Obed nodded toward the front bedroom across the hall.

"That is my room," Ham said.

"And these others?"

"They are not being used at the moment," Ham said. He could not imagine how he could explain to his father that he had permitted a black buck to sleep in one of their beds. He was damned well sure of one thing. Warren would order the mattress burned.

Obed shrugged. He walked slowly along the hallway opening the doors and inspecting the silent bedrooms. Ham stood with Lucretia Borgia and Memnon watching with a sense of helplessness totally foreign to him. This bastard black was pushing it, he was driving him too far. God help the son of a bitch when retribution did come. The goddamn king was going to think lightning had struck him.

Obed took his time. He looked into each room, gazing at them with interest and then moving on. From the end of the hallway, he returned, coming along the carpet until he reached the closed door of the room next to Warren's bedroom.

Obed opened the door, looked in, inspecting it for the second time and finding it less than royal, but suitable. "I'll take this room," he said.

Both Lucretia Borgia and Memnon gasped, glancing toward the master. Ham swore aloud. "I'm damned if you will," he said. "That there is my own mother's room!"

"Where is she?" Obed inquired.

"She's at her eternal resting place. Out in the family cemetery. But that don't make no never mind. She daid. But that room has not been used since she died. It ain't about to be used now. Not by you."

"Why not?"

"None of your goddamn business why not." Ham's voice rasped. "I say not. And that's it. But I can tell you, Obed. King or no king. No nigger ever will sleep in my mother's bed or soil her holy bedroom."

Obed merely shrugged his shoulders. "This room will serve me well. You may have my baggage sent up here."

"I'll have you killed, you son of a bitch," Ham said.

Obed smiled. "Maybe you will," he said. He shrugged. "In the meantime, I want my luggage sent up here. As long as I am in this house, I'll stay in this room."

Ham could barely contain the rage boiling up inside him. His hands trembled and he knotted them into fists at his sides. He watched Obed step through the doorway entering that shrine which was his mother's bedroom. Nothing had been altered. Her dresses still hung in the closets, her brushes and combs still lined her dresser top. The ruffled spread was crisp with age, but it was the one which she had used.

Ham, Lucretia Borgia, and Memnon walked stiffly along the shadowed hall to the open door. They stepped inside the room and stopped, as if poled.

Obed had thrown himself across the mattress. He lay on his back, luxuriating. "It will do," he said. "It will do."

Ham was unable to speak. Obed said, "You may leave me now, all of you. . . . By the way, Mr. Maxwell, if you wish to send the girl Big Pearl up here to me, I'll be pleased to service her for you, as often as you both may wish."

XVIII

A chilled, steady drizzle of rain set in about dusk, enshrouding the old plantation. The household at Falconhurst retired earlier even than usual, spirits dampened by the gray cold, and fatigue clutching at them all after the long and unusual day. Ham was sick at the thought that his father might see Obed enter or leave Miss Sophie's bedroom. That place was a holy shrine as far as Warren was concerned. It was the last place he would permit a black buck to set foot. Ham prayed silently that he could get them all through this night. He vowed that he would make new and final arrangements tomorrow.

Inside the bedroom Obed looked around, as satisfied as he could be under these ugly conditions. This room offered clearly the best sleeping quarters in this rough old farmhouse. Since they were the best, they would serve him. It added to his cold pleasure of victory that he understood how sick it made Hammond Maxwell to have him in his mother's bedroom. His twisted smile widened. Well, a man needed a little pleasure in life. Sometimes a few small victories were all he ever managed.

Obed undressed and lay down back across the bed. He did not pull the covers up and he kept a faint glow in the room by turning the wick as low as possible in the lamp without extinguishing the weak fire.

He stared at the ceiling. Tears welled in his eyes and for a long time he lay unmoving. He did not even blink.

His thoughts were bitter. He blamed nobody else for this dangerous situation in which he found himself. It was his own

fault. Stupidly, he had listened to white men's lies and white men's promises and he had believed them. True, he had not trusted Maxwell from the first, even when he hadn't known why he mistrusted him. Hallwell had appeared too stupid to be wily or dishonest. Well, he had been betrayed. By himself, but mostly by that white man in that bedroom across the hall. He had never doubted from the first that Maxwell had hidden in a dark area of the aft deck and shoved a tipsy Merrill Hallwell overboard. Maxwell had never intended anything but this from the first. He had meant to bring Obed back here to Falconhurst and enslave him, and he meant to let nothing stop him.

Obed clenched his fists at his sides.

He heard a rustling sound, almost like mice in the walls. He tilted his head on the pillow and saw the corridor door opened slightly.

Miz Lucretia Borgia sidled into the room through the slitted doorway and closed it behind her.

Obed sat up on the mattress, naked, and watched her come toward him in the vague crimson light. She still wore that red turban, but she was clad in a muslin nightgown that spilled down to her ankles.

She paused, standing beside the bed. "I had to come talk to you, Obed."

He shrugged and smiled. "I had hoped for more than talk from you, Lucretia Borgia."

She smiled. "You don't need to sweet-talk me into your bed, Your Highness. I was b'iling hot and ready for you the minute I laid eyes on you."

He smiled. "Did you think I was pretty, standing naked out there?"

She caught his hand and sat on the edge of the mattress beside him. "I thought you were a fool, Your Majesty. That's why I had to come talk with you. If you hope to see many more sunsets, you got to have better sense than you showed out there today."

Obed caught his breath and stiffened. "I hoped maybe you were my friend."

"I is your friend. I wants to be."

He shook his head. "Sorry. You don't sound like it. You

think I was a fool and I think no man, white or black, has the right to touch me or to finger me."

She clutched his big hands tighter in hers. "Oh, that's where you're wrong, Obed. Your body ain't yours. Your soul ain't yours. Not here. Massa Ham has brought you here and you belongs to him now."

"I belong to nobody. I am a king."

"I know." Miz Lucretia Borgia spoke in a gentle, appeasing tone she might use with an unruly child.

"No. You don't understand. I am the king among kings. The lion king of kings. I am descended through blood from the Earth God. I am the greatest of monarchs, chosen by our gods to rule my people."

"In your own country you are king."

"No! Wherever I go, still I am king, to be accorded all the respect and reverence paid all kings. . . . When the King of England leaves England, is he any less the king?"

She drew a deep breath. "We are black, Obed. Black."

"Of course I'm black. Dark skin is the natural flesh tone of my people to the deepest antiquity. Such pigmentation is nature's protection against the violence of the sun in our native land. I have great pride in the color of my skin. Don't you?"

She shrugged slightly. "I reckon. But bein' black ain't never bought me very much. And I know the way we is looked at by white people. We are not the same as them. Not in this country, Obed. Not in this land. And you got to understand that if'n you are to stay alive."

He laughed coldly. "Whatever that white ape Maxwell will do, he won't kill me. He's too greedy for that. He wants to use me. He wants me alive."

"But he can make you wish you was dead, Obed. Can't you understand me? You think you is safe because you are a perfect Mandingo and that's what Massa Ham wants to own above everything. . . . But did you see that skull in Miz Lucy's cabin? That was a perfect Mandingo too. Massa Ham set terrible store by that Mandingo. Loved him better than anything else on this earth. Coddled him like a pet. But when he got finally riled against Mede, he killed him. As he'll kill you."

"He can't kill me and get away with it. No more than he can finger me. And I won't have that."

"Mister Ham is our massa, Obed. No matter who you were at home, or what you were. That's all changed now. You belong body and soul to a white man and that means all your body. Even your asshole, do he want to ream it out in any way that pleases him."

"God almighty. That's insanity."

"Hit may be insanity, but that's the way hit is. That's what I tryin' to tell you. That's what you got to learn to live with."

"There must be law."

Miz Lucretia Borgia winced, her eyes filling with tears of compassion. "Oh, Gawd, you poor devil. You really don't understand, do you? Yes, there is law. But they—white people—they is the law. The law ain't *for* them, it *is* them. They the law. What they say is law. What they do is law. There ain't no law for the black man. Massa Ham, he could murder you and nobody would say ag'in him. Blacks not allowed to say ag'in white men. Massa Ham, he b'iled Mede. B'iled the meat off'n his bones and nobody said against him. Because he is the law. . . . Lawd Gawd, Obed, let them white men poke they fingers in your ass, in your mouth, because they rule us, they all-powerful."

"I can leave."

"You run away, the slave patrollers git you. And then it worse. They brand your skin with a R. Middle of your forehead. Or a great raw R on your back. They throw you in white man's jail. They whup you. They kill you. It whatever they decide."

"But there must be somebody. Some law. Somewhere."

"Maybe. But I ain't nevah heard of it. I say they ain't. Not for us. An' that's what you got to see. Niggers ain't got no laws to help them, only laws to hold them down and keep them enslaved." She stroked his cheek with her hand. "You're the finest man I ever seed—white or black—but you is still a nigger. Here in Alabama, you nothin' but a nigger, and that there means you is lower than the mud."

"I won't live that way."

"Maybe livin'—even like that—is better'n dying. Maybe it better to try to find a little happiness in this hell than to rise up ag'in 'em so's they kills you."

He stared at her. "How have you stood it?"

"By learnin' to live with it. By turnin' it aroun' so hit works for me and not against me. By bein' smarter than they is. And, God knows, that ain't hard to do. That's about the easiest part of all. They is more'n one way to skin a cat."

"Is there no happiness in this life for you, Lucretia Borgia? How can everything a black needs, everything he wants, be denied to him? Good God, Lucretia Borgia, what kind of scared rats are we to allow these puny, tight-assed white men to rule us? Aren't we human beings with the right to love and find happiness? Or are you right? Are we just animals, to live with our tails between our legs—the way Maxwell sees us—to be enslaved and sold?"

She caressed his arms, the muscles of his chest, stroking him gently as she spoke.

"We niggers, Obed. That's all we are. Ain't our fault. Our skins are black. Nothin' we can do about that. That's the way we born. We can fight, get hurt and crippled and kilt. Or we can learn to live with these white gods, makin' ourselves as happy as we can. White man gobbles up the cake, we scrounge for the crumbs. But we live. We stay alive. Maybe someday things be better. But not in my lifetime. Not in yours. You a king. A smart man. But you got to be truly smart if your life don't end right here at Falconhurst. You got to be smart. Smarter than you ever been in all your life. Smarter than they is . . . and you got to watch for your chance."

Obed smiled and put his arm about her. "You are a wonderful woman, Lucretia Borgia. . . ." He laughed in a gentle way. "I will tell you the truth. I hated you out there today when I saw a fine woman like you submitting to those puny white men. But I don't hate you any more."

She drew him closer, feeling the radiant heat of his bared body. Static charges of excitement sped through her. "You got to learn how to live with white people, Obed. They ain't folks like us. They tricky. They cruel, without even caring. Ain't no way to make 'em care. You got to bow to them and smile at them and, if you're smart enough, you can git them to eatin' out'n your hand."

"I want to get away from here. That's all I want. I want to go back home."

"Yes. I knows what you want," she said. "But I also know, you got to stay alive to git what you want. . . . And to stay alive, you got to listen to me. You got to be smarter'n they are." She smiled in a taut way. "Like I am."

His hands moved on her gowned body. "We don't talk about it anymore," he whispered. "Not right now."

"Why not?"

"Look down at my lap, woman, and you'll see why not."

She laughed. "I ain't taken my eyes off your lap. You shore is one beautiful black man."

Obed lifted her easily into his arms. He caught her muslin shift in his fist and removed it in one fluid motion. Being naked in bed beside a man with the light burning was something new to Lucretia. New and exciting. She felt his hands close over her full, high-standing breasts. She gasped out her delight and closed her own hand on his massive maulstick. It was staff enough to destroy a woman, but she could not imagine a pleasanter way to die.

She moved her head along his flat belly and down to his crotch. She kissed the empurpled head of his rod. "Been wantin' to do that," she whispered, "since the first moment I spied it, out there today."

He laughed. "Be my guest."

As she nuzzled him, he caressed her breasts and moved his palms over the satiny smoothness of her body, exploring her legs and thighs.

She cried out, "Oh Gawd, Your Majesty, I cain't wait no more."

"Don't have to wait anymore," he whispered. He drew her down under him across the mattress, pressing his mouth to hers. She opened her lips, trying to devour him, wanting all of him inside her. For long moments they lay enraptured, fingers, hands, tongues, bodies, busy, exploring, finding, satisfying.

When Obed drove himself to her in a frenzy and fever, Lucretia Borgia wailed aloud.

Obed gasped. "My God, what's the matter?"

"Ain't nothin' the matter, your greatness. Oh, King Obed, honey love, keep doin' what you is doin'."

"You scream like that, you'll rouse the farm."

She laughed frantically. "Just screamin' to God, Obed. That's all."

"Screaming? To God?" Obed thrust again and she cried out again.

"That's right," she gasped. "You killin' me an' I dyin' happy. Screams of thanksgivin', that's all. Wants God hisself to hear my wailin', I do. Wants him to know how I thanks him and appreciate all the goodness I is gittin' from you . . . God's gift to me . . . You think any white woman evah had anything as good as this? I know better. I know better. Oh, my dear sweet Jesus, I calls this God's greatest gift—an' I don't nevah in this life want to stop receivin'. . . ."

Obed smiled. He thrust harder and harder, faster and faster, and Lucretia Borgia wailed louder in her ecstasy, crying out her thanksgiving to a beneficent and kindly Jehovah. . . .

The sun had splattered crimson across the horizon when Hammond awoke, troubled without knowing precisely why. He lay, taking stock of all that had happened. He remembered what upset him so that he had slept lightly, threshing his arms from time to time and jackknifing his legs on the suddenly uncomfortable mattress. He was alone in his bed and after a moment he spied Ellen wrapped in a quilt and sleeping soundly on a pad upon the floor.

He got up and pulled on his pants. With his naked foot he prodded the slave girl awake and ordered her to get up. "Hit's good daylight," he said. "Should-a been stirrin' long ago."

Ellen sat up, the quilt falling from her bare body, revealing the taut and full young breasts. Ham winced and said roughly, "Git your clothes on. Don't like you nekid like this in the mawnin'." He exhaled. "Anyway, need you to help me git my boot on. Gonna be a big day. Got a lot to do."

"You kindly talked in your sleep," Ellen said in a soft tone. "Flopped around and kicked somethin' fierce. Never knowed you to be like that."

"Tired," Ham said, dressing quickly. He did not bother washing under his arms or at his crotch this morning. He felt driven, as if there were not time for all he had to do, all that must be done. And he was sick with fear that his father might

have discovered Obed in Miss Sophie's bedroom. Ham did not see how he could ever explain that away to the aging man's satisfaction. "I musta been plumb flummoxed out."

Hammond went out of the bedroom alone, going along the corridor and down the stairs. When he walked into the dining room, he found his father sitting alone at the big table, nervous and troubled. Ham's heart sank. Then he saw that Memnon, standing at Warren's elbow, had tears in his eyes and that he was sniffling and wiping his nose on the sleeve of his denim shirt. Delaying his confrontation with his father as long as he could, Ham snorted at Memnon. "What in hell ails you this mawnin', Mem?"

"Nothin' Massa. Ain't nothin'," Mem said, shaking his head. He did not look up.

"Well, if'n ain't nothin' troublin' you, you best straighten yo'self up, you lazy black bastid. Touch of the whip make you spry."

"Yas suh." This morning, after a night alone in his third-floor bedroom, and Miz Lucretia Borgia's cot unoccupied, he was too dispirited even to beg for clemency. He did not care, it was almost as if he didn't believe the bull whip could hurt him this morning.

"Git my breakfast in here fast," Ham ordered, and limped to his father's chair. He kissed the older man on the lips and sat down at his right. He took up the cup of coffee Memnon had somehow remembered to pour for him before he shuffled into the ktichen. "How you, Papa?" Ham said. He forced a wide smile. "How's your rheumatiz? How you comin' on?"

"Not tol'able," Warren said. He stared at his son oddly. "Not even tol'able. Bad enough my bones ache, and I cold all night no matter how many spreads and quilts they pile on me, but las' night I kept hearin' noises, couldn't hardly get no sleep."

Ham winced, fearing the worst. He tried again to smile, but failed. "What kind of noises, Papa?"

Warren shook his head, frowning as if he feared for his own sanity. Christ knew, when a man got old, no telling the noises he could hear in the night, the panic that kept him sleepless. "That's what I don't know, son. Sounded like voices talkin', distant, yet close enough that I could hear the

sound, but not make out what was bein' said. An' cryin' out. I swear I heard screamin'. . . . Feared I was catchin' the brain fever that upset you for so long. . . . Heard 'em till all hours. I swear if I hadn't knowed better, I'd of sworn them sounds come from the next room."

"Mama's room?" Ham tried to sound aghast and disbelieving.

Warren nodded. "I know it sound crazy. I know how crazy it do sound. Heard laughter. From your mother's room. Knowed it couldn't be. Knowed you'd never let nobody into her room."

"You know I wouldn't, Papa."

"That's what upset me. Afraid it's all in my head. Lord knows, hit's got to be."

"I'm sure and certain, Papa, it was just your imagination."

Warren nodded, only partly mollified. "Still, it makes me sick at my stomach. Almost wish they really *was* noises, you know? And not just in my head . . . God almighty, it's hell to git old."

About eight o'clock that morning, sitting with his father in the overheated parlor, Ham heard Obed descending the stairwell. The buck pranced like a stallion, heavy-footed on the steps. Ham excused himself and went out of the front room, closing the door behind him. He intercepted Obed in the hallway.

Ham's voice stopped the mansa. "Did you sleep well?" Ham's voice dripped sarcasm.

Obed stared at Ham, that faint, defiant smile pulling at his wide mouth. "When I slept."

Ham forced himself to remain calm. "Papa say he heard noises all night long from that room."

Obed merely shrugged. Several taut seconds ticked away silently in the shadowed hallway. It was so quiet Ham could hear the crackling of the fire on the parlor hearth beyond that closed door. When he realized the Negro was going to say no more, Ham said, "You go on into the kitchen. Miz Lucretia Borgia, she done fix yo' breakfus' in there. Breakfus' fit for a king." His voice was crusted with irony.

Obed only shrugged his huge shoulders again and walked past him. Ham had to retreat a step on his game leg or be bumped. Obed went through the silent dining room. He could sense the white man's enraged gaze fixed on his back. He went into the kitchen without even bothering to look over his shoulder. But he knew Ham was there, watching him malevolently, unmoving. The hell with him.

Lucretia met him inside the door. She looked a little pallid, tired, but she smiled beatifically and led him to the pinewood table, where she had set a place for him, complete with a vase of cut flowers from the yard. He smiled and thanked her.

"Ain't often we gits to feed a king in this kitchen," she told him with a warm smile. She served him personally. There were stacks of pancakes with honey or cane syrup, eggs fried sunny-side up, grits, and beans. She kept his coffee cup filled, standing near to serve him.

There were a dozen other servants in the room, young boys, girls, and the butler. The kitchen workers stood, entranced by their guest, unable to take their gazes from him as he ate. Infrequently, he would look up from his food and smile at them.

Memnon stood first on one foot, then on the other, his mouth a taut line. He was sick with jealousy and hatred, but he dared not say anything. He was not afraid of the stranger, but he did fear the wrath of Miz Lucretia Borgia. He had felt the back of her hand, her sarcasm, her taunting, and her cruelty before. When he could stand it no more, he ducked into the pantry and sneaked a long pull at a whiskey bottle. . . .

As Obed finished his breakfast, Hammond came in from the barnyard through the kitchen door. He was smiling, but there was no reassurance in this for Obed.

"You through eatin', Obed?" Ham said.

Obed nodded and stood up. He thanked Miz Lucretia Borgia for a truly fine meal.

"You sure you had plenty to eat?" Ham persisted.

Obed shrugged, not bothering to answer.

"Want you to git plenty to eat," Ham said. "This is going to be a big day for you. . . . Tell you what, I'd like you to come down to the barn with me. Got something I want to show you."

Obed nodded. Ham jerked his head, ordering him to follow, and went back out the rear door. Miz Lucretia Borgia spoke softly, warningly. "You be careful, Your Highness, what you say an' do."

"Let him be careful," Obed said, making no effort to modulate his voice. "He wants no trouble with me, he has only to send me back home."

Ham pretended he had not even heard what Obed said inside the kitchen. He crossed the rear stoop and went down the steps to the yard, where flocks of chickens, guinea hens, and ducks milled. Obed strode in his wake, gazing around the barnyard as they walked. Ham limped ahead silently without speaking or looking back across his shoulder.

The great double doors of the barn were pushed open and braced. A dry odor of hay, barn rats, leather, and ammonia sifted out to meet them. Ham walked inside, limping to the apex of a long triangle of sunlight. He paused there and turned, watching Obed.

When he walked into the barn, Obed first sensed the presence of other men, then he saw the blacks step out of the shadows surrounding him.

Obed paused, still in the oblong of sunlight. His mouth twisted with a pitying smile at Hammond Maxwell. He counted the slaves. There were six of the biggest blacks Ham had been able to assemble from his herd.

"You figure to need six of them to do your work, Mr. Maxwell?" Obed inquired.

"Going to talk some sense into you, Obed," Ham said. His voice was deadly quiet, controlled. "How I do that is up to you. Don't need nobody if you show good sense. . . . If'n you don't show sense, why then, whatever happens, that's up to you."

"Don't have to have any trouble, Mr. Maxwell. Just send me back to New Orleans. I have my own money. I'll pay my own fare back to Dakar. You lied getting me here. But just let me go back quietly, and we'll forget the rest of it."

"That's it," Ham said. "That's what you got to understand, boy. You ain't goin' nowhere. You belong here now."

"We might as well settle that, Mr. Maxwell. I don't belong here. There's just one way you can keep me here. You kill me and bury me. That's the only way."

Ham almost smiled. "Tha's not the only way, boy. Tha's one way. Tha's the last option. . . . But I can tell you this—when you're no longer no good to me, I don't give a damn if'n you live or die, you better understand that."

"Then you might as well kill me and get it over," Obed said. "If I get away from here, I'll go to the authorities."

Now Ham did laugh. "The authorities. About what, boy?"

"About abduction. About holding me, a man with a visitor's visa, as your prisoner."

"Ain't no authorities in this here state give a shit about that, boy. You might as well understand."

"There must be law. Even in this godforsaken part of the world."

Ham smiled coldly. He nodded his head. "Oh, they's law. But not for blacks. Not for niggers . . . Get it straight. They ain't nobody to listen to you—because a nigger talkin' ag'in a white man, tha's ag'in the law. Get that through your burr head. No black can testify ag'in a white man. About nothin'."

"I am a king."

"Are you? Or are you just another rogue black stirrin' up trouble? I say you're just another nigger. You think you're the first black king to be brought over here in slave chains? Only difference, I was good to you. I brought you first class. All the way. And the law is one hundred percent on my side, boy. The sooner you realize that, and make up your mind to abide with it, the better it's going to be for you."

Obed took a step toward Ham. Ham felt the stirring of total panic deep in his belly. He had never met the Negro he truly feared until this moment. The smile on Obed's lips made hackles quiver at the nape of Ham's neck. Ham said, "Boys. Watch this son-bitch."

"I wouldn't touch you," Obed said. "Unless I had to. I just want you to get it through your head. You can't keep me here unless you kill me. You might as well let me go. I'll get back to New Orleans alone. I'll get back home alone."

"You bastid. Don't you understand plain American? You ain't going nowhere. Now you can stop playing king, Obed. Because here you ain't no king. You is just what all blacks has always been—beasts of burden, sons of Ham, born to slavery. A goddamn nigger."

Obed suddenly laughed. "I'm walking out of here. Don't try to stop me." He turned on his heel and moved toward the open doors and the yard.

Ham spoke curtly, sharply. "Git the son-bitch, boys. Don't let him out of here."

The hulking black men lunged at Obed from all sides. Obed set himself as they struck him with their shoulders, fists, and feet. He caught one of them, his fingers snagging the eyes beneath a ridged brow. He hurled the man backward, screaming in agony. The others hesitated, but Ham's threats spurred them to attack again. One of them caught Obed about the legs and tried to wrestle him down to his knees. Two other clutched at his arms. Another drove his huge fists into Obed's belly. Obed drove his fist into this man's face and the fellow staggered backward, his legs trembling and no longer supporting him. "God damn you," Ham yelled. "This son-bitch gits away, I'll bull-whip the lot of you."

Obed brought the side of his opened hand down across the neck of the man clutching his legs. The fellow released his grip and slid along Obed's calves to the ground, where he lay unmoving. Only the two men holding his arms remained and Obed set his legs apart, bracing himself against them. Using the strength in his right arm, he flung the man away from him and turned to choke the remaining black.

But something happened from behind him. Ham ran to him with crowbar raised. He brought it down with all the strength in his arms across Obed's skull.

In a terrible kind of slow motion, Obed sank to his knees. The barn and the sunlight whirled about his head. He saw Ham's twisted face, skittering around him like a bat's face against the darkness. He could no longer hold himself up on his knees and he sprawled forward on his face into blackness. He did not even feel the impact when he struck, facefirst, in the hot sand.

Part Four:

ESCAPE INTO HELL

XIX

Slowly, painfully, Obed struggled upward from vast, frightening darkness that stretched into eternity and where there was no reality. It was like death—only pain existed; fiery, tormenting pain that drove everything else from his consciousness. He felt as if he swam through a thick soupy green slime, silt that choked him and pressed him upon his nostrils, his eyes, his chest, and which dragged at his legs, pulling him downward. His chest seemed ready to burst at the pressures. His head pounded, so it seemed the blood in his temples must spew through his aching eyes. The acid dryness of his lips and tongue extended far down into his stomach. It was as if he were parched, burning up. He did not know where he was. He knew only he had to escape the fetters and pressures and flashing short-circuits of pain.

He opened his eyes, and felt as if the top of his skull were being blasted off. He closed them again tightly and waited a long time until the hot agony subsided before he dared try again. He opened his eyes and then for some moments he lay still, afraid to move his head for fear he'd plunge again into the depths of blackness and torment.

He gradually became aware of his surroundings, still without knowing where he was. He saw he was in a dimly lit tack room somewhere. He was half-sprawled against an upright on several layers of hay, and there was hay all over the wooden floor. He could hear mice squeaking in the deep recesses of the hay. The studs along the wall were littered with ropes, reins, lines, and leathers. Used and discarded gear was tossed

in the corners. Faint sunlight glittered through the cracks in the plank walls.

He tried to move and found himself trussed up. He was linked from handcuffs and chains to a hook screwed into the upright against which he half-leaned. He realized that the pain in his ankles came from the metal spancels that shackled him. One leg was free, but both his wrists were secured in metal handcuffs.

He struggled vainly, pulling at his wrists, jerking at the chains that bound him to the upright, but the metal only dug into his flesh, adding to the pain. His linen shirt had been torn away, his pantaloons were ripped and snagged, caked with mud as if he had been dragged here. Red clay was streaked along his dark skin. He found blood on his neck and shoulders from the head wound. The wound brought it all back, and he remembered what had happened and why he was here, trussed like a wild animal. He lay, writhing, torn between unbearable pain and intolerable hatred. . . .

The tack-room door was shoved open. A blast of sunlight spewed across the room where Obed lay, piercing his eyes and rattling against the crown of his head. He closed his eyes tightly, grimacing.

Hammond Maxwell walked in. He was smartly dressed today, in polished boots, pressed trousers, and a blue shirt. He tilted his planter's hat back on his freckled forehead. Two huge black men accompanied Maxwell, walking on his shadow, silent and taut. Obed gazed at the two slaves for a moment, hopefully. Hope died quickly. No matter what these men had once been, Ham Maxwell was right about them now: They were animals that could talk, and that's all they were. All pride, self-esteem, self-respect, dignity, and even their real manhood had been beaten from them.

Obed sagged against the upright. Ham strode half across the patch of sunlight and stopped, legs apart. He carried a coiled whip which he kept striking against his thigh or the palm of his hand. He seemed drawn as taut as Obed, as full of hatred.

Ham's mouth twisted and he spoke in sarcasm. "Stinks in here," he said. "Smells like nigger. Yessir, smell of nigger

and nothin' but nigger. Tell you, I never have got used to that nigger stink. Cain't no way abide that nigger stink."

"If I'd known you were coming," Obed said between clenched teeth, "I'd have burned incense." He learned one thing quickly, and the hard way. He wanted to talk as little as possible. Each word was like a dart striking the inside of his head. And words had to burn their way up through his parched throat.

"You bastid," Ham said. "You ain't goin' to learn, are you?"

"To bow and scrape to you?" Obed shook his head. "No, I'm never going to learn that."

Ham limped a step closer. "Maybe you won't, but you'll wish to God you had before I'm through with you. A touch of the blacksnake every day ought to help you." He glanced over his shoulder at the two blacks. "How 'bout it, Napoleon? An' you, Phallus. This varmint hurt you pretty bad yestidy, didn't he? Reckon it please you to lay on nine or ten strokes of the bullwhip. Eh? Eh?"

"Yas suh, Massa-suh," Napoleon said. He stared at the floor.

"You stupid bastards," Obed raged. "Why do you kowtow to this puny white man? Why don't you break his back? Why do you do what he says?"

"Massa Ham, he my massa," Napoleon said.

"You stupid son of a bitch." Obed's breath rasped out of him and he sagged against the upright.

"Is Ole Nap here stupid, King? Or is it you that's stupid? Nap, he walkin' free. He gits to bed down a wench every night he wants to. He gits plenty of nigger vittles, all he wants to eat. An' look at you. Shackled on the floor, your skull laid open." He laughed. "Don't know whether Nap is stupid, or whether you is."

Obed stared up at the slave dealer. "How long are you planning to keep me chained up like this?"

The question enraged Ham. He went weak with fury at the thought of a slave's daring to question him about anything.

"None of your goddamn business," Ham answered. "Tole you yestidy, you a slave. A black slave. A fuckin' black slave what don't ast no questions of white folks. But I tell you this,

nigger. You'll stay here, like this, till I can trust you to do like I told you."

Obed let his head sag against his chest. He closed his eyes and drew his mouth into a taut line. He turned his head away and lay unmoving.

Ham went on standing there for a few moments, waiting for Obed to speak, to ask for food, for water, for medication for the head wound. He didn't care what Obed asked for, the Negro was going to pay for it with some open sign of humility and obedience. It might take a long time, but the animal would learn. He'd learn.

When Obed didn't speak, Ham sucked in his breath, rasping, frustrated. He forced a hearty laugh. "Well, Nap. Phallus. You fellows ready for a good time?" He held up his splayed fingers. "Want you both to lay this here whip on this boy, one time for each finger. I'll count for you."

Ham extended the coiled bullwhip toward the rugged black man and hesitantly Nap took it. He hefted it a moment in his fist. "You want me and Phallus should string him up first, Massa?"

"No, goddamn it. I wants him strung up, I say I wants him strung up. He gone learn. We gone come in heah every blessed mornin' with a dose of the bullwhip till he ready to say uncle. Ain't stringin' him up. He gonna know, he gits it. Right here. Every mornin'. You lay it on him right like he is. He'll turn for you, you burn him right. When his belly's done, he'll turn his back. I want him reddened up. You hear me, Nap? Put some muscle in it. You watch my hand. I count how many blows from you. How many from Phallus. . . . You both git your chance at him, so don't fret."

He stepped aside and instructed Nap. "Stand off from him, like. Let the tip of the whip do the cuttin'. An' aim so you don't hit him in the face unless you has to. No sense tearin' a eye open or something . . . You lay it on, Nap, belly and back. . . . Don't worry none, he turn for you." He stared down at the prostrate man, his mouth twisting. "Maybe he think he won't, but he will."

"Yes suh, Massa," Nap said.

Ham retreated to the wall and leaned against the plankings in the deepest shadows. He felt queasy in the belly. He

always had hated having to whip the Negroes, even the most recalcitrant of them. But it was something he'd learned long ago that he had to stomach. It was something had to be done. Here he was dealing with vanity, arrogance, and insolence, traits that were fatal in a black. Might as well knock a Negro in the head as let him run around brazen and uppity. That was something he couldn't stand in any black. He wouldn't have it in this one.

Nap took his stance and drew his arm back, letting the whip uncoil, its tip trailing in the hay on the plank flooring. He took a deep breath and lashed it across Obed's bare chest and arms.

"That one," Ham counted from the wall. "Lay to it this time, Nap."

Obed kept his eyes closed, his teeth clenched together. He swore he would not cry out. He would not give this bastard white man the satisfaction of hearing him beg. But by the fourth cutting lash of the bullwhip, he gasped out in a moan his clenched teeth could not stifle. This sound pleased the slave owner. Obed heard Ham's exultant laugh of satisfaction.

"There. That better," Ham said. "Larrup him one more, Nap. Then it be Phallus's turn."

Obed remained unmoving, his body crimson with lash marks, his teeth sunk into his underlip.

Phallus trailed the whip and walked around the center upright so he stood on the other side of the man on the floor. Obed's body glowed. He felt as if he were being attacked by army ants. He tried to lie still, but he could not. He sprawled involuntarily over on his belly and the whip sliced into his back. The impact of the oiled leathers on the bared flesh crackled in the silent tack room. Muffled sobs, deranged and distorted, pressed through the clenched teeth before Phallus had laid on his five strokes.

When the whips stopped, the burn and cut went on as if he were still being whipped for some moments. Obed's battered body lay absolutely unmoving. Biting back the nausea, Ham came and stood over him. He stared down at the prostrate man. "Skin ain't cut," he said. "That's good. Hate to weal him up any more an' we has to." He bent over closer and

raised his voice. "You heah me, Obed? Tell me. Who is yo' massa?"

Obed opened his eyes slowly. For some beats, the white man and the two blacks, the tack room gear and the slash of sunlight spun and wheeled about his head. He stared up at that hated white face, almost insane with fiery pain. He spat and spoke imperiously between his teeth. "I am a king," he said.

"You son of a bitch. You stupid son of a bitch," Ham railed. His face twisted with agonized rage and frustration. "You stubborn as airy jackass. You acts like a jackass, we treats you like a jackass. . . . We be back tomorrow mornin', Obed . . . with another dose of the bullwhip."

He turned away then, his stomach churning with acidity, his mouth twisted in a sick grimace. Silently he cursed the stupidity of black animals. He growled at Nap. "Git the pimentade. Rub it on him. Rub it in good."

"That grease burn raw skin somethin' fierce, Massa," Phallus said.

Ham jerked his head up. He looked as if he might kill the slave. His cheeks were pallid, rigid, his eyes wide. "Did I ast you if pimentade burn? I know it burns. I know just what hit does. But it heal too. We is injured him, we got to heal. . . . We don't want to ruin him. We just got to teach him what he got to know."

Nap brought a crock of liquid grease and dipped a sponge into it. The mixture was made of lemon juice, salt, and cayenne pepper. Until he had discovered the medication, Ham had used turpentine on whip marks and open cuts, but he'd found the pimentade cured faster and cleaner and left fewer scars. It had a sickening odor because it had sat so long in the open crock that it had rotted; but this did not alter its efficacy, Ham felt.

Nap sopped the dripping sponge over Obed's bared, marked back. Ham was right, the skin was not sliced open, but it was tender, ready to break. Obed gasped aloud. The burn of the pimentade was a hundred times more acute than even the bite of the whip. Obed whimpered helplessly and fell over on his back, trying to escape. Quietly, persistently, Nap dipped the

sponge into the crock again and smeared the fluid over Obed's shoulders, arms, chest, and belly.

Obed had to chew at his underlip to keep from screaming in agony. He had endured the whip, but he did not believe he could stand the cure.

Ham walked to the door. Then he paused and looked over his shoulder. "You can end this here hurtin' any time you want to, Obed. That's up to you. This ain't nothin' I want to do. I gits no pleasure. You bringin' it on your own self. All you got to do is say I your massa, an' you willin' to obey me and abide by my laws. We stops then."

The hated voice cut into Obed deeper than the leather whips had. He rolled his head back and forth.

"You go to hell," Obed said. He turned his head to the wall, the intolerable pain burning and stinging without relief.

He heard Ham's savage laugh. "Rest well, Your Majesty. We be back in the mornin' with another dose."

Obed remained unmoving. The agony of the whip wales and the pimentade together was so intense that he escaped it, finally, the only way he could. He fell into a restless sleep, lying as if on a bed of fiery red coals. . . .

He woke up, feeling threatened, chilled, as if some animal crouched over him ready to strike at his jugular. Shuddering, he opened his eyes and stared up into the face of Miz Lucretia Borgia.

Her large olive-black eyes were filled with tears. She knelt beside him, her arms laden. She whispered, "I brought you cool water from the well."

"Bless you."

"And laudanum. For the pain. I brought you some food too."

He stared up at her. "Does your master Ham know you're out here?"

She shook her head. "It don't matter. I couldn't sleep, thinking about you in pain, out here, an' thirsty and hungry."

"No way to treat a king," he agreed. "But you go back to the big house. What would he do if he caught you out here? Would he whip you too?"

A shudder coursed through her. "They whupped me once.

They stripped me naked in front of all the other slaves, and they whupped me. They whupped me once, but nevah again. Nobody evah goin' whup me again."

"Then you go back to the house and stay out of trouble. I can stand this. I can take care of myself."

She laughed slightly, a sad little sound. "Yeah, you look real spry and chipper."

"I've felt better."

She drew her hand along his muscled upper arm and across his chest. "Did they cut you? Are you all right?"

"Nothing wrong with me that a key to these locks won't cure, Lucretia."

She gasped, drawing in a shocked voice. She knelt there staring at him in horror. "Lawd Gawd, ain't you suffered enough? You want them to kill you? Don't you talk that way."

"I have to get out of here, Lucretia. I have to get away from Falconhurst. You know that. I'm in hell."

Now her eyes did brim with tears. She laid down the stack of clothing she'd brought, the largest size osnaburg pants and extra large denim shirt. For a moment they were silent, hearing the sounds in the barn, the tack room, the forest beyond the quarters. The darkness seemed suddenly filled with terrors for Lucretia Borgia. She gripped his arm in both her hands. "Not yet you ain't in hell, Obed. You jes' think you is. You keep Massa Ham roused up against you, you'll really find out about white man's hell."

He sighed and was silent for a long moment. She pressed a mason jar of chilled well water into his hand. He drank thirstily, letting the water run from the sides of his mouth and spill soothingly against his chest. At last he gazed at Lucretia in the darkness. "Do you want me to kill him, Lucretia?"

"What? Kill Massa Ham? What I raised from a sickly chile and his poor momma in her grave? My God, no. I don't want you to kill Massa Ham. Don't even talk like that."

"I will," he said. "I will kill him. I know it. You know it. In time I will kill him if I have to stay here."

She stared at him, bound and secured to the upright. "How you plan to do that, tressed up here like a shoat waitin' the knife?"

He exhaled heavily. "I'll get free. I will. I'll let him think I am beaten if I have to. But when my hands are free, I swear to God, Lucretia, I will kill him. I'll choke him to death. With these hands. I swear it. Anything less is too good for him."

"Oh, Obed, please. Don't even think like that. You'll just git yourself killed. I don't want that, Obed. I don't want to see you hurt no more. No more than I want to see Massa Ham harmed, either."

"Then get me away from here," he pleaded. "For his sake. Not for mine. You love your kindly white master so much, save his life. Get me a key, Lucretia. . . . I ask nothing more of you."

She was crying now, wiping the back of her hand across her nose. She shook her head. "What could you do, where could you go, Obed, even if you were free?"

"I would get away from here. I would go without killing Ham Maxwell. I would get to New Orleans."

"I been to New Orleans. What you think you do there, a runaway slave?"

"I have money. I can get to New Orleans. That's where I want to go. I can book passage on a ship to Dakar. Just help me, Lucretia."

Miz Lucretia Borgia was silent for a long moment. "You got no money, Obed. None."

"I do. A pouch of gold pieces. I brought it from Africa. It's in my bedroom up at the big house."

"That ain't your bedroom no more. Massa Ham threw all your things out of there. He had the bedding changed and the room aired. And your pouch of money. He took that. Put it among his own gold. He say blacks ain't got no need for money."

"I will kill him."

"You'll only get yourself killed. That's why I can't help you get free," she wept.

Obed drew a deep breath. He spoke in a taut, soft voice. "You know where the key is, Lucretia. You can unlock the cuffs and the spancel. Then you walk away. You return the key. I will be gone. And in return I swear not to kill that bastard white man, much as I need to."

She got up unsteadily and turned, going away toward the door. She had to get away from the persuasiveness of his voice, the attraction of his body, even the memory of his lovemaking. She wanted to help him. In her heart she knew she would rather hear of Obed's being slain running toward freedom on some back road than to watch him killed slowly, starved for food, kept from water, chained like a mad dog.

"'Lucretia. Please," he whispered after her. "You're my only hope, Lucretia Borgia. The only hope I have."

She shook her head and did not turn around. She walked out of the door and closed it stealthily behind her. She started across the yard toward the darkened house, her shoulders sagged round. She had been enslaved by Ham Maxwell most of her life, but she had been enslaved by Mansa Obed in these last two days. She had found happiness in his strong arms that she had never dreamed she could find in this world. She knew his goodness, his strength, his pride in who he was. They would kill him before they broke him. She knew that, even if Master Hammond couldn't see it yet.

She had lived on this farm most of her life. She had been born into slavery and knew nothing else. She had been happier at Falconhurst than most women are happy anywhere. They had been good to her. Their cruelty had been casual and unthinking. She had learned how to handle them. She had learned to love Master Ham, for all his faults, and she was loyal to him.

Crying softly, she glanced over her shoulder. That man shackled in the tack room was no ordinary man. His threat to kill Ham Maxwell, no matter how long it took and to do it the first time his hands were free, was not an idle one. He was a king, a man who could not live on his knees as slaves had to.

She paused, staring up at the star-scattered night sky. If she helped Obed get free, even if she returned the key, Master Ham might finally learn that it was she who had betrayed him. This would be the end of the old trust between them. The goodness of the years she had lived in this house. The end of everything between them.

If she let Obed stay chained in that tack room, she signed his death warrant. He would die before he would submit. Their whips and chains would cut and scar him. They would

starve him. Cruelty fed on cruelty. The longer he resisted, the harder they would beat him, the more inhumanely they would use him.

If she did nothing, she could remain loyal to Master Ham, she could go on being trusted by him. This had been the way of her life all these years. That pattern would go on as it always had. But there would be a terrible difference. Obed's death would be on her hands, because as of right now, she alone on this farm knew he would die before he would submit, or if he submitted, it would be only long enough to get his hands free and about Master Ham's throat. And could she watch Obed tormented and beaten to death and go on living with herself?

She sobbed aloud, looking around as if she found herself in some alien place. Could she live with herself if she let them kill Obed?

God knew. If anybody knew, God knew. . . .

XX

Ham arrived at the tack room promptly at seven o'clock the next morning. He carried the coiled whip clutched in his fist. He slapped it against his leg as he walked. He told himself he prayed he didn't have to use this blacksnake. Let the black bastard come to his senses. He doesn't have to get himself hurt. He paused in the sweaty sunlight outside the room and motioned to Nap and Phallus. The two black men opened the door, swinging them back and bracing them against the rough plank walls. A dust-flecked band of sunlight splashed ahead of them into the darkened room.

Ham strode forward, limping on his game leg. He was used to seeing what he expected to see on Falconhurst. This was his domain and he took the unchanging order of existence for granted. He was two steps inside the tack room before warning signals flashed in his brain. Something was wrong.

It was already too late. He stopped dead in his tracks and cried out a caution to Nap and Phallus. Both men stopped behind him. The handcuffs and spancels were empty, lying on the hay-scattered floor.

"He's gone," Ham said over his shoulder. "Son-bitch is gone."

"I'm here," Obed said. He stepped from the shadows inside the door. He walked into the sunlight directly into Ham's path.

"Get him," Ham said, "Get the bastid."

Before either of the slow-moving, hulking black men could move, Obed set himself. He seemed to measure Ham and the

distance between them. He swung with his left, striking Ham flush on the point of his jaw.

There was the empty sound of fist against bone and flesh, resounding and echoing in the morning silence. It sounded as if Ham's jaw might be broken. The miracle would be if it were not. The outcome was incredibly fast. Ham didn't slump to his knees. He pitched forward on his face, his hat falling aside in the scattered hay. He lay still, his arms still reaching out for the support he never found. His head lay twisted oddly on his neck beside the upright.

With a terrible and regal dignity, Obed bent over and took up the whip from the floor where Ham had dropped it. He stood facing Nap and Phallus. His voice rasped. "All right," he said. "Come on. Which one of you wants it first?"

Nap and Phallus stood as if frozen at the doorway. They shook their heads. Nap whimpered. "Don't mean you no harm. Jes' followin' orders."

Phallus nodded violently. "That's right, suh. Jes' followin' orders. Jes' doin' what the massa say."

"All right. Now you do what I say. And you jump fast unless you want this whip, and once I start I will not stop until you bleed."

Nap swung his arm up in a protective gesture. "You don't have to do that, suh. No, suh. Phallus and me. We do what you say."

"You are loyal bastards, are you not?"

"If'n you say so, suh." Nap looked ready to weep. "If'n you say so."

"Come in here," Obed ordered. When the men hesitated, he uncoiled the whip and snapped it, the sound loud and sharp, like the crack of a gun. Nap and Phallus almost trampled each other stepping inside the tack room. They could not obey Obed swiftly enough.

"You, Phallus, get on your knees there by that upright. You take that spancel and set it round your ankle and lock it."

When Phallus hesitated, the whip cracked. The big man slouched forward. He sank to the flooring. "Massa Ham, he gwine be terrible upset 'bout this."

"Shut up and do what I say. Set that spancel. Tighter.

Now lock it." Obed waited until Phallus had snapped the spancel about his ankle, then he stepped to him and jerked the chain that secured the shackle to the upright. Phallus cried out in sudden pain.

Nap heeled around to run. Obed levered himself up to his feet in a fluid motion. The bullwhip lashed out and snagged Nap around the throat. Obed jerked and Nap came toppling back toward him, sobbing. "Didn't mean nothin', suh. Didn't mean no wrong."

"No, you son of a bitch, you just meant to alarm the whole damn place." He yanked the leather free, burning the big Negro's neck. Nap whimpered, stroking at the leather burns.

Obed said. "Now, Nap, I am going to give you a real tough job. You've got to be smart to do this right. Pick up those handcuffs."

Nap knelt and took up the handcuffs that were chained to the upright. Obed put his foot against the huge man's posterior and shoved. Nap sprawled out in the hay. Phallus laughed nervously until Obed glared at him. Then he fell silent, trying to smile, his eyes round with terror.

"What you mean to do with us?" Phallus whispered.

"None of your goddamn business," Obed said in a precise imitation of the tone of voice Ham Maxwell had used on him in this room yesterday morning. "I'll tell you what you need to know."

"Yas, suh, Massa-suh," Phallus said, teeth chattering.

On his knees, Nap turned and peered up at Obed. Nap wanted no more trouble with the mansa. He said in a pleading tone, "What-all you wants me to do with these yeah cuffs, suh?"

"I want you to snap one of them on your master's wrist. Go ahead, do it."

Nap drew a deep breath. He moved hesitantly, in terror that Master Ham would rouse and catch him in the act of shackling him. He could hardly bring himself to touch the white man's wrist. By the time he had secured the cuff, his bladder ached and his genitals burned. "I got to pee," he whispered. "Please, suh, you done scairt the pee out'n me."

Obed shrugged. "Pee. Who cares. They are your pants."

He glanced down at himself. "By the way, these are your pants too. And your shirt. Rather tight on me, but thanks."

Nap only nodded. He remained on his knees, holding the cuff. Obed swore at him. "Damn you. Lock that other cuff on your own wrist. Can't you do anything right! Move. Do it!"

Trembling, Napoleon obeyed. Then he slumped down, his back against the upright. His eyes brimmed with tears, he stared across the sunstruck barnyard to that terrible future moment when Master Ham awoke to find the three of them shackled together in the tack room. He bit at his lip to keep it from trembling.

"Now, listen close to me," Obed said. "I am leaving now. I hope—for your sakes—that I get away. But remember, I might not make it. If I do not, I'll be brought back here. I might be in chains. But I won't stay in chains. Any more than I did this time. If I am brought back this time, I will kill both of you the minute I get loose."

"Lawd Gawd, suh, why would you want to do that?"

"Because if I am caught, I will know it is because you and Phallus roused the farm. I will know you did not wait quiet here until your master woke up. And I will kill you for it."

"Massa Ham be ragin' we don't yell for help."

Obed shrugged. "That is up to you, Nap. And you, Phallus. Would you rather have me kill you, or would you rather your master be upset? Make up your own minds."

"Oh my Gawd," Nap whispered. His head sagged on his chest.

Obed backed away to the doors. He closed them, standing for a moment in the slit between them. "Remember now, you just wait until your white master wakes up. That is all you must do."

Both Nap and Phallus stared at him, but neither of them answered him. Obed started to move away and then he stopped. "Oh, and by the way, please tell Miz Lucretia Borgia that I kept my word to her." He jerked his head toward the prostrate white man unconscious on the flooring. "I did not kill him."

* * *

Hammond moved with a terrible and cold efficiency when finally he came up from the well of unconsciousness into which he had been plunged. He wasted no time on questions of who and why and what and how. He did not speak even one word of recrimination. All of that could wait. There was one thing on his mind. He had to find that prize Negro and he had to find him before he got too far away or fell into hands of conscienceless white slave-stealers.

He began by shouting for help. He asked Nap and Phallus how long they figured he'd been unconscious, but then swung his arm impatiently, realizing time meant nothing to these animals. He had to remind himself that this was all they were, black animals without any trace of human intelligence or human emotions. He drew some reassurance from this. That black bastard that had escaped these shackles. He was only an animal too—with animal cunning maybe, but no real power to think and plan. They would run him to ground fast enough.

As soon as he was freed from the handcuffs, he moved swiftly and deliberately, seeming to start a dozen plans and options in motion at once. He dispatched trusted boys on mules to the nearby plantations to spread the alarm that a rogue black was loose from Falconhurst. The Gassaways and the Holcombs and Doc Redfield. He hoped Doc Redfield would come riding fast. Doc was a wily old devil in the matter of chasing down blacks. Maybe he got so smart by working around the animals all his life, so he could think like they did.

"You all know that nigger ain't got a chance in hell of gettin' away." Ham spoke mostly to himself, though Miz Lucretia Borgia was at his heels every moment. This was reassuring too. She was a smart black woman. A man could count on a woman like her. "I done sent Bruno to alert the slave patrollers office in Benson. Soon as that big buck gits off this place, patrols are after him. Hell, he won't git five miles."

He ordered a carriage hitched up and brought to the front of the house, with Napoleon handling the lines. He kissed his father good-bye and told him as briefly as possible that Obed had broken loose. "Ain't surprised," Warren said. "That's a wild stallion."

"He gonna be tamed afore I'm through with him," Ham vowed. "Tamed or dead. Hit's got so, it don't matter that much to me. . . . Should never tried to do this . . . should of got on along to the Texies and looked it over like the way I planned. . . . I'll tame him, or I'll kill him. If'n I cain't have him to breed like I want, then to hell with him. He can jes' die far as I care."

"He a wild one. You might have to kill him to run him down," his father said.

"Won't. Big buck like that, seven feet tall, lost—soon gwine git hungry. Plus'n, where's a seven-foot nigger gwine hide? You tell me that, Papa. Where-at's a seven-foot nigger hopin' to hide with white men and dogs and patrollers a-chasin' him?"

Carrying two Kentucky long rifles, Ham went out to the carriage at the front steps. Old Warren managed to limp, supporting himself on Mem's arm, out to stand and wave good-bye. Ham found Miz Lucretia Borgia at his heels. He snorted. "Where-at you think you're goin'?"

"Mayhap I can help you," she said. "My eyes mighty good. I spy things well. And if you cotch him, maybe I can help you talk to him."

Ham shrugged, allowing her to climb to the boot of the carriage with Nap. Ham got into the tonneau, placing the rifles at his feet. He kept watching for Doc Redfield, but they passed the Seven Mile Road turnoff and there was no sign of the veterinarian. "Reckon Doc didn't git the word in time. We jes' got to go on without him."

He ordered Nap to stop the carriage. He swung down and searched the road for a hundred yards each way. A light rain had left the clay moist. Footprints would remain etched in the earth for a long time.

He stopped suddenly and yelped in triumph. He laughed exultantly. He ordered Nap to come to him. Miz Lucretia got out of the carriage, too, unable to control her curiosity.

"Look at that. Look at that bare footprint. And that one," Ham said. He laughed again. "Nothin' left a footprint that big exceptin' an elephant or that black runaway." He shook his head. "Dumb bastid nigger. Stayin' on the road. He thinks he knows the way back to New Orleans and that's where's he's

headed. Well, we'uns best git movin'. . . . He's up there ahead of us somewhere if somebody ain't already kilt him."

Obed trotted a mile or more from Falconhurst before he even slowed down to draw a breath of air. He felt as if he had forgotten to breathe. He glanced at the sun, keeping it at his back. He had studied the skies and the roads carefully on that long trek up from New Orleans. He had believed then that this moment would come. He had to know where he was going. He had to keep moving fast. He had to be careful.

He tramped through abandoned fields of fennel and wire grass, through pine hammocks. He came suddenly upon a small swamp, an arm of the river that edged the Maxwell plantation. He had to slow down and pick his way across this mire. Water hyacinths were beginning to bloom in the stagnant pools. The purple flowers burst out of phallic stalks. Wild plum trees whispered in the faint morning breeze. Sunlight slanted in, dappling the wet ground and shining on the leaves of the swamp trees. A flock of wild turkeys took sudden flight, causing Obed to stop, catching his breath and watching the birds take wing in panic and a clattering of wings. He looked around, being sure the sun was behind him.

He came at last out on dry land, a ridgelike hammock at the edge of the swamp. He was thankful to be out of the dark, venomous, insect-infested slough into open country. He brushed through weblike underbrush, and swarms of blind mosquitoes enveloped him. He climbed on up the dry land still batting at the insects, spitting them from his lips and blowing them from his nostrils.

On the pine ridge Obed hesitated. He glanced back at the swamp and then checked the sky. Gathering clouds obscured the sun. Through an opening in the trees he glimpsed a snake fence of hacked pines and beyond it a trace. He decided to follow the road for a while, at least until the sun broke through the clouds and verified his bearings. He could move stealthily. In the silence of the forest he should hear the approach of horseman, wagons, or even the dainty tread of a deer, for God's sake.

He came out on the road, breathing through his mouth. He set out, walking west swiftly, his head up. He was sweated,

the denim shirt discolored with perspiration. He had not eaten since the food Miz Lucretia Borgia had brought him sometime early the night before. But he was not hungry. Striding along, he sent up a little prayer of thanksgiving that Miz Lucretia Borgia had returned with the iron key in the darkness just before dawn. He had lain, hopeless, without hope, until she suddenly appeared in the darkness, unspeaking beside him. She'd pressed the key into his hand and moved away as silently and quickly as she had come.

He winced. It hadn't been easy for Miz Lucretia Borgia to betray her white master after a lifetime of learned fidelity. Obed could not understand the insanity that underlay such loyalty, and yet he understood how much it meant to Miz Lucretia Borgia. She had brought him the key, but she had not even wanted to speak to him. . . .

Obed kept walking west. The infrequently traveled road was overgrown, its tracks obscured in places by weeds and rocks, and eroded in places by small gullies, but always passable. He knew he had to be careful. The stillness and the weed-grown road could deceive him. Somebody used this road and he had to be alert. He lengthened his stride, trotting easily down the middle of the trail.

His heart quickening, Obed recognized the landmark Ham had pointed out on the way east from New Orleans. Off to his right reared the skeletal remains of High Tower, the old abandoned plantation of Ezra Hightower. Obed wanted to laugh aloud. He was on the right road. Instinct had told him this, but now it was certified.

Suddenly something distant, threatening, not really heard but *felt* intuitively, instinctively. Obed stopped walking, his heart hammering faster. Only silence greeted his ears, but he was not reassured.

He remained standing perfectly still until the sound took form. The creak of carriage wheels, the plodding hooves of horses. The sound came from behind him.

He plunged off the roadway and into the underbrush. The weeds and young trees clattered as he fought his way through them. He raced between the thick growth, going deeper into the forest.

* * *

Napoleon shouted, sitting forward on the boot of the carriage. "Up yonder, Massa. Up yonder. I seen something jump from the road into the brush."

Ham caught up the long rifle. "Get up there. We check for tracks. We finds any, we takes after him."

Miz Lucretia spoke in cold derision. "Don't believe ole Nap saw anything, Massa. He always seein' something. . . . If it anything at all, it a deer or something."

"That may be, woman," Ham said. "But we take no chances. We check."

Nap pulled the carriage off the trace at the place where he had seen something lunge from the roadway into the underbrush. Ham swung down, carrying the rifle. He and Nap stalked along the trail, searching for footprints. Ham found one, a large impression in the clay. "It him, Nap. It him all right. Come on. We get him."

By the time Nap and Ham were down the embankment and into the underbrush, Miz Lucretia Borgia, despite her bulk, was out of the carriage and at their heels.

Ham panted over his shoulder. "You don't has to come, Lucretia."

"Wants to," she panted. "I along pleadin' with you, Massa, to take him alive. Don't kill him, Massa. He everything you want in a Mandingo."

Ham swore and spoke across his shoulder. "Don't mean to kill him. I tole you. Won't less'n he makes me."

Holding her arms across her full bosom, Miz Lucretia Borgia ran in the wake of the two men. They stopped frequently, searching until they found prints in the mud. Each time she uttered unspoken prayers that they would find nothing, and each time she set out running behind them when they did.

She heard something and paused, breathing through her mouth. Then she recognized the humming roar of the Tombigbee River. She prayed to God that Obed would make it to the waterway, and then she added the prayer that he could swim.

"Please God," she whispered. "Please God."

They heard a splash ahead and Ham cursed, urging them to move faster. "It him," he yelled. "I know it. He up there."

Ham ran out on a small bluff overlooking the wide, swift-rushing black river.

He saw something in the current, bobbling like a log. Holding his gun at ready, he ran downstream.

Miz Lucretia Borgia followed at his heels. She spoke urgently, her voice shaking. "Hit looks to me like a old bull gator, Massa."

"Don't look like no gator to me," Nap said.

"Shut your tater-trap, nigger," Miz Lucretia Borgia snarled across her shoulder. "You don't talk lessen you talked to. My eyes plumb good. I say hit's a gator, floating along with its head showing, huntin', way gators do."

With the rifle at his shoulder, his finger on the trigger, Ham hesitated. The gunstock was socked hard against his flesh, biting into it. His finger trembled. He sighted along the barrel, one eye tightly closed, the other squinted, making long shadowy wrinkles down his weathered cheeks and around his eyes as he tried to telescope his vision. He trusted Lucretia Borgia's eyesight. She could spot a chicken hawk a mile away.

He sweated, feeling the sweat bubble out under the band of his hat and ooze along his forehead, burning, salty in his eyes. A slight tremor racked his body. He peered along the gunsight at that head—was it really a human head, a black matted burr head?—bobbling along in the rough downpulling current of the Tombigbee? Reason told him it was the rascal fugitive. It had to be. They had chased Obed to this place. Yet he saw no sign that the head was lifted, or even tilted, to breathe. A human being had to breathe, didn't he? Unless he was drowned? Unless he was already dead?

Still, he had no compunctions at wasting one last shot. A pellet put into an old bull gator at this distance would likely give the animal a headache for a few days. But that same lead in a man's head would end it all for him, like snuffing out a mean candle. Was that what he wanted? An end to the perfect Mandingan? Dead? Even if he got away now, that didn't end anything. A well-placed bullet in that floating mark out there might end it all. Or he could wait It was a long way to New Orleans, and a hell of a lot farther to Dakar.

Ham drew a deep breath. He tilted his head, just enough

to look over the barrel of the long rifle at the black woman in her red bandanna. She was gazing at him, intently, unblinkingly. There was something in her taut, rigid face and dry, agonized eyes that reached deep inside him and twisted.

He winced and, after a moment, lowered the gun. He nodded his head. "Yeah, Lucretia Borgia. Yeah. Reckon you is right, after all. That's likely what that is. A old bull gator what jumped in the river when he heard us a-coming."

XXI

Obed skirted the town and came out on the trail several miles to the west of it. Every muscle in his body felt the effects of the lashing he'd taken at Falconhurst. He was drawn taut and even when he tried to keep from it, he found himself breathing through his parted lips, panting for breath. It wasn't that he was tired. He who'd been vain in his fearlessness found himself suddenly hesitant, watchful, fearful.

He plodded along the vaguely defined trace most of the day. He met few travelers, and when he did, he crouched in the underbrush until any wagons or horsemen passed him. The sense of exultance that had buoyed him when he escaped Hammond Maxwell's stud farm was tempered in the late afternoon by the debilitating pressures of exhaustion. Physically, he was not tired. He could trot all day long with no ill effects, but as the weak sun, filtered through lowering clouds, presaged dusk and a lonely night in a hostile land, he became infected by a kind of hopelessness, the feeling that Hammond Maxwell was not through with him, that the redneck farmer would hound him until he was captured or dead. He prided himself that he never stopped fighting, but suddenly he saw he might be no match for this slave breeder, a man who never gave up a prize he coveted.

"Hell, I am not afraid of that little banty rooster, I am just tired, hungry," he told himself. "I would feel better if I ate."

He came upon sprawling patches of blackberry bushes and he picked handfuls of the berries, cramming them into his

mouth and chewing lustily. He discolored his hands and mouth and marked his arms and legs on briars.

A little before dark he found an abandoned shack in a hammock back from the road. The place had lain deserted for a long time. It was almost hidden in underbrush and weeds. There was no door anymore. He stepped inside and looked around. Holes in the roofing and places where planking had been torn from the walls made it far less than weatherproof, but Obed gathered weeds, pine boughs, and brush and made himself a bed in a corner where wall and roof remained intact. Within a few moments after he lay down in the gathering darkness, he was asleep.

He awoke soon after daybreak, ravenously hungry. He'd always been prideful, never begged for anything, but he knew he needed help. He had to have food if he was going to stay alert and alive and moving swiftly toward New Orleans, that promised land he kept shining before him like some holy grail.

After an hour of walking along the rutted roadway, he approached a weather-beaten shack. It sat back from the road behind a tottering fence in a soured, bared yard. A half-clothed, bedraggled white child of about five played with a cornshuck doll in the crosshatched shade of a yellowing china-berry tree. A hound dog barked once, then retreated under the porch.

As unappetizing as the shack appeared, Obed was hungry and remembered beggars couldn't be choosers. The gate sagged half-open in disrepair. Obed entered the yard, smiling at the little girl in the shade. She went on sitting near the tree trunk, holding her doll. She stared up at him, her thin, pale cheeks expressionless. He smiled wider, trying to urge an answering smile from her, but she remained unmoving, unmoved. She seemed not even to blink her eyes.

"Hello, little girl," Obed said. "Is your daddy at home?"

The child peered up at him. "Are you a nigger, Mister?"

He forced himself to smile. "'I wonder if you would run and call your daddy for me? Would you tell him I would like to talk to him?"

The child went on sitting there. She did not refuse to obey him, she simply ignored his request.

Obed heard something behind him and he turned. A sunken-bellied, thin-faced, bearded, and barefoot man in a blue shirt and overalls came to the open door of the one-room shell. The man stared from sun-faded blue eyes exactly as the child did.

Obed bobbed his head in the most accepted bow he'd witnessed at Falconhurst when whites appeared. He said, "I'se a travelin' through, suh. I be mighty hungry. I gots no money to pay you, but I be willing chop wood, or be do'n chores for breakfast."

The man went on staring at him. After a long moment he said, "You wait right there."

Obed said, "Thank you, suh." He glanced back down at the unmoving child. She held the cornshuck doll against her thin chest. Otherwise she had not moved.

He heard movement behind him from the house again. When he turned, his jaw sagged. The man held a long rifle in his arms, his finger fixed on the trigger. From half across the yard, Obed saw the man's hands trembled. Obed shook his head. "Please do not be afraid, sir. I just need food."

"Well, we ain't got no food. We got nothing for runaway rogue niggers. Think I don't know you is runaway? God damn you, nigger, you git off my land and down that road, or I kill you."

At the panic and threat in her father's voice, the little girl began to scream. Obed held up both hands in a placating way and began to retreat across the yard toward the sagging gate and the road beyond. The child went on screaming, clasping the doll against her. The man stood in the doorway with the rifle fixed on Obed. It seemed to be a mile across that bare yard. He reached the fence, stepped through, still backing. When he got to the road, he ran, going down the trace. When he glanced back, the man still stood in his doorway and the child crouched in the yard, screaming. . . .

In his shock at being threatened with death for no greater crime than entering a man's yard to beg for food, Obed forgot hunger. For the next three hours he gathered berries along the

road. When he saw a rabbit jump in a fallow field behind a snake fence, he gathered three stones and leaped the fence. He spent almost an hour zigzagging across the weed-grown field until he suddenly flushed a rabbit from a nest. He set himself, drew back his arm, and threw the first stone. The rabbit, struck in the head, lunged upward and toppled in the grass. Obed dropped the two unneeded rocks and ran across the rough ground. Without a knife, he was forced to use his teeth and the strength of his hands to skin and gut the animal. He worked swiftly. When the rabbit was skinned and bled, he gathered sticks and weeds and patiently struck a fire from flint. He held the rabbit on a pronged branch over the fire until it was baked and dripping juices. He tried to wait until the meat cooled, but could not. Laughing to himself, he sat against the bole of a wild hickory tree and wolfed down the hot steaming meat. He could feel his self-confidence returning. At least he wasn't going to starve before he got to New Orleans.

Obed's muscles and flesh were quick to heal from the ten strokes of the bullwhip back at Falconhurst. There were no damaging scars or disfiguring welts. He laughed. Fortunately they left no scars on his spirit either. Ten strokes of a whip were not enough to condition him to the estate of slavery, or to serve to bring him closer to his white master. After his brief stay at Falconhurst Plantation, he had some better understanding of the philosophy of slavery. Miz Lucretia Borgia had said it—you took what was permitted and you didn't question what was not possible. Why should a slave beat his head against a wall until it was bloodied and accomplish nothing? You learned to live with your master, you got through each day, and you avoided punishment for even the appearance of misdoing. Well, he understood Miz Lucretia, but as for himself, he would rather be dead. With an ironic grin he figured this might well be the outcome. So be it. He would keep running as long as he could, he would stay free as long as he breathed. There was no other way for him, either. . . .

Obed's first view of Golden Leas Plantation was stunning. He came first upon hundreds of acres of cotton in bloom. There seemed to be rows of the plants from the roadway to the

farthest horizon. Every few hundred feet were signs. KEEP OUT. PLEASE DO NOT DISTURB THE TRANQUILITY OF GOLDEN LEAS PLANTATION. In the dim distance ahead he saw a green oasis in this desert of cotton, and the white tile roofing of a mansion nestled atop a splendid and luxuriant knoll. As he approached he saw the clean lines of classic elegance of the palatial home. This imposing house loomed starkly over the dry fields, over barns and carriage houses behind it. He paused at the stone gates marking the entrance lane from the public highway. A small sign read, WELCOME. DO NOT DISTURB THE TRANQUILITY OF GOLDEN LEAS PLANTATION.

The way his stomach growled helped him make his decision. He left the road and started up the lane between elm trees, stately and tall and whispering in a mild breeze. He had run into trouble at the shack of the dirt-poor white man. These people were richer; this had to mean they were more intelligent, didn't it? Perhaps they owned slaves. They were more likely to be compassionate, to understand his need for food.

By the time he reached the sloping lawn before the mansion, dogs were yelping from fenced areas behind the house. He supposed it was possible that someone might turn those dogs out at the sight of him, but he was hungry; it was a chance he had to take.

He was almost to the wide front entrance, four soaring white pillars and a sloping roof above a vast veranda, when he paused. Flowers and grass grew profusely, carefully tended. Yet in the somnolent afternoon, the place seemed deserted, so quiet he could hear the drone of bees at the gardenia bushes.

He stood in the middle of the graveled driveway and called out, "Please. Is anyone at home?"

There was the sound of crackling wicker furniture on the gallery. Obed stared toward a divan, where a woman lay with her blond head propped high on pillows. She sat up at the sound of his voice and stared out at him. He caught his breath, hardly able to believe his eyes. He'd been in London, Cairo, and other capitals, but surely this was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She lolled alone on the veranda, brilliantly hued in the shadows. She moved indolently, not taking her gaze from him, sitting upright. In her splendid

isolation she was elegant. Her bare arms and face were a rare golden color, touched with prisms of reflected sunlight through the shadows. Her eyes were palely blue and her mouth full and red.

Obed stared at her in delighted wonder, conscious that her gaze was locked upon his. He had no idea whether she was paralyzed by terror or simply fascinated by his size, his strangeness, his sudden appearance in the middle of a wasted afternoon. Her eyes did not fall away, that much was certain. The look she fixed on him was bold—a look of inventory more even than appraisal. She stared at his muscled, lithe body, his thick chest, flat belly, and narrow hips. Her eyes seemed to return to the crotch of his tight-fitting osnaburg britches.

She shifted her gaze slowly, casually, but with heated interest. She noted the classic head, the sharply hewn profile, the large and wide-set eyes. Her eyes paused a moment at he strong column of his throat and then, without any trace of embarrassment, she let her gaze fall again along his muscled body. Her look stripped him of his britches and seemed to peel away fabrics until he was naked to her gaze. She bit her lip and tilted her head upward until their eyes met again. He tried to smile in a humble way and bobbed his head without taking his eyes from hers. The distance between them for that moment seemed to evaporate, and he sensed the warmth of her, the invitation in her face. Caution warned him: This was a white woman, a palatial mansion, a strange and hostile land. He knew nothing of its customs, but he did know the terrible gulf between the races. He wanted food; he didn't want trouble.

She said, "Who are you? What are you doing here? What do you want?"

He tried to smile at her. "I am simply passing through. I just wondered if perhaps you might get your cook or someone to give me some food. It has been a day or so since I have had anything to eat but blackberries. Big as I am, they do not help much."

Something seemed to happen in the woman's aster-blue eyes, some deep swirling which was the only warning Obed sensed. With that faint smile twisting her lips, she rose from

the divan, levering herself upward to her feet, the cane supports rustling under her. She did not take her gaze from him, the expression in her face did not alter. She opened her mouth as wide as she could, screaming at the top of her voice.

A static charge of terror bolted through Obed's body, paralyzing him. He stared up at the woman on the gallery, too stunned for that moment even to move. He only shook his head helplessly.

"Help!" the woman cried. "He looked at me. This Nigra looked at me!"

It was as if her voice were a siren spurring the somnolent farm into rabid action. It was as if someone had stirred an ant bed. Everything happened at once. Men, unseen inside the house and out, yelled. They called to one another and answered in suddenly roused outrage. They ran, boots clattering on polished floors. From the fenced rear yards the dogs howled, frenzied. Blacks appeard from the barn, outbuildings, even from the fields which had seemed to stretch emptily into a serene eternity. The place was alive with outraged people, all running toward the front of the mansion.

Obed looked around wildly, feeling trapped. The woman's hysterical voice reverberated inside his head and echoed in his empty belly. He could not even hope to reason with her. There wasn't time, and there was no reason in her. She kept screaming in her hysteria.

Obed heeled around and ran. He did not follow the winding route of the elm-shaded lane to the main gate. He bolted west across the manicured grass and bright gardens into the high-standing acres of cotton. He raced across the field, his long strides moving him swiftly, terror goading him.

He reached the public road and ran along it for a little ways. He checked back across his shoulder. He could hear the yelling and the howling of dogs, but no one was yet pursuing him. He knew why. Slaves were saddling horses, men were loading rifles, grabbing up whips. He had a few moments and he used them as well as he could. He ran along the road at top speed.

When he heard the first yelping of bloodhounds and the pound of fast-ridden horses on the trace behind him, he looked for a break in the silent forest. He went down an

incline to a muddy ditch and started up the other side to an abandoned field. As he entered the field, he saw where the pine log snake fence had toppled. Hearing the dogs yelping behind him, he hesitated long enough to clutch up a rough-hewn fence rail. Just gripping it in his fist gave him a sense of confidence. It might slow him down in the forest. He did not care. He was not totally unarmed against his pursuers and their dogs.

Breathing through his mouth, he kept running at top speed. He left the abandoned field and crossed a pine hammock. He entered a more densely forested area, climbing to a knoll and going over it. The yelping hounds stayed relentlessly on his trail. The sound of their baying seemed not to recede at all, no matter how swiftly he ran.

The undergrowth closed on him like a jungle. Using the fence rail as a club, he beat a path through it. But this slowed him down. The dogs were nearer. He could even hear the horsemen in the distance, shouting to one another.

He stepped into stagnant black water up to his calves. He told himself that maybe the hounds would lose his scent in here.

He hesitated, staring ahead into the green swamp that yawned silently before him. It was a hushed, dead, and melancholy place. A sickly miasma hung in the air, cypress knees rotted in the scum-thick, unmoving water. Elders and willows grew like green-curtained barriers in the clouded mists out there. He sucked in a deep breath. He didn't want to get pushed into that trackless, unknown waste with the dogs following him. They would move faster than he would in there. The moment had come to take a stand. Maybe he couldn't stop the searching riders, but he could slow them.

He put his back to a bay tree and held the fence rail like a staff across his chest. The two hounds, yelping in sudden frenzy as the scent grew stronger, broke through the underbrush. The lead dog lunged for Obed's throat without hesitating.

The railing caught the dog across the skull, crushing it. The dog slumped and fell, without even yelping. The second dog tried to stop, still barking, but keeping its distance. Obed had to attack it. It snarled and leaped away, but the split rail caught it across the spine. It stumbled, crawling, and Obed

smashed its skull. He caught the dogs up and impaled them on lower branches of a tree. He left them hanging there, and turned, running.

The five riders from Golden Leas Plantation, three white men and two blacks, broke through the brush at the edge of the swamp. The blacks were in the lead, breaking down the undergrowth so the white men did not have to dismount. The blacks led their unsaddled mules. Behind them, the white horsemen rode elegantly upon saddled horses, rifles carried in the crooks of their arms. The blacks saw the hounds first, impaled upon the tree. One of the slaves vomited suddenly, grasping his belly with his arms.

When the white riders broke through the underbrush and found the two slaves standing, round-eyed with terror, and one of them sick at his stomach, they paused. They had started out on this hunt, filled with outrage and determined to run the Negro into the ground. Now they stared at the carcasses of the hounds left dangling from the tree.

"God almighty," the oldest white man muttered. "I seen some things in my time. I never seen anything like this in all my life." He winced, touching at his graying mustache with the backs of his fingers.

One of the slaves whimpered. He stood shaking his head. "Hit's Ole Blue. An' Jimbo . . . He kilt Ole Blue and Jimbo and hung 'em there. . . ." The black man began to cry.

The white men stared in silence for some moments at those dangling carcasses. It seemed somehow a supernatural warning, even to the plantation men who were ordinarily level-headed and not at all superstitious. But they'd seen a lot of fugitives run down by bloodhounds. They'd never seen those hounds slain and left dangling on tree limbs. It was almost as if the animals were hung there as a challenge, a deadly dare. It was sickening the way the hounds hung there, crushed heads dangling strangely on broken necks, tongues lolling from gaping mouths, glassy eyes staring at nothing. Some of the enthusiasm for this hunt dissipated in the breast of the bravest of them.

A youthful man, in riding habit and top hat said, "How do we expect to go on tracking this fugitive without dogs?"

The oldest man shook his head. "Reckon we can't." He looked around, the green swamp, the silent forest crowding in upon them. "Looks like we're stopped. At least till we get some help. I think that's best. I think we better try to get some help."

"That'll waste time," the youngest said. "He'd be far away by the time we picked up his trail again."

The top-hatted man said, "I say, hell, let him go. There's even the chance that he's likely hiding in this brush, watching us, waiting for a chance to jump us. One by one."

The youngest whispered, awed, glancing around. "You reckon?"

The top-hatted man swore. "We don't know what kind of monster this is. Killed those hounds with his bare hands."

The oldest man agreed. "I say we turn back. The rascal is gone by now. We can't trail him without dogs. Like you say, it take too long to round up the help we need. We may be dealin' with a black maniac here. But I say, by God, we put the fear of guns in him. He'll know better than to turn back this way. I say it ain't likely he'll ever come back around here at all."

XXII

Obed ran through the forest without looking back. The afternoon sun blazed down unmercifully. Just before dusk it began to rain, first in a steady drizzle and then pelting, blinding him as he picked his way through the trees. He decided it was safe to return to the road west since it was raining and he had not heard sounds of the riders from Golden Leas since he'd left their hounds dangling dead from that tree. They seemed to have called off the hunt for the moment. At least he had bought himself a little time.

The dreary afternoon darkened his own spirits. He slogged along the roadway in the rain. The fact that the riders had called off the pursuit didn't do much to cheer him. He made enemies every mile along his route: Hammond Maxwell was sure to offer a reward for his return, and he would soon enough come looking for him. That white man with the gun at the shack. He would be only too proud to tell other whites which way the giant Negro had run. There wasn't much hope that the Golden Leas men would let him go in peace, either. He had insulted one of their women. He had slain their hunting dogs.

The rain passed, leaving the road full of mud puddles and pock-marked with rivulets. The leaves of the brush along the trail held water. Obed was wet and chilled. The evening wind was cold. He looked about as long as there was daylight, but found no habitation where he might sleep dry at least and sheltered. He gave up any hope of this and bedded down in a copse of loblolly pines, covering himself with damp leaves and broken boughs.

Obed awoke at the first pink fissure of dawn with a sense that something was wrong, more amiss than usual, though he did not know what. He found it difficult to orient himself. His teeth chattered and his body ached with cold though he burned with fever at the same time. He raised himself on his elbow and stared around the pine copse before he could remember where he was.

He got up, stretching and bending, trying to get the chill and the kinks out of his body. He returned to the roadway, looking for a creek where he could wash his face, cool the fever in his forehead, and drink a quart of water. He had never been so thirsty.

The country looked desolate and desolated. The land stretched poor and infertile as far as he could see. He saw no signs of civilization, or of shacks. He was desperately hungry by now, but after that white man's threat he was afraid to ask white people for food. As long as he lived, he'd never forget the hysteria in the scream of the blond woman at Golden Leas. He shivered, only partly from the cold.

He sensed more than heard a rustling sound in the undergrowth to his right. He stopped dead in his tracks in the middle of the weed-grown trace and stared, deciding it must be a swamp animal on the prowl.

A louder rustling from the other side of the road brought him wheeling around. A man on a horse rode out of the brush and up the incline. Obed set himself to sprint back the way he had come, to dart into the forest. Once in the woods, he would be safer. He could move faster afoot than the man on the horse.

From the other side of the road a second horseman appeared, moving up the incline and cutting off Obed's hope for escape.

"Whoa there, nigger," one of the men said. "Where-at you think you're goin'?"

Obed stared at the men. They were mounted on brown horses; they wore brown uniforms and flat-crowned brown hats. Both were heavily armed, though neither held a gun in his hand. Rifles were socked into saddle scabbards, handguns were fit into holsters on their belts. They reined their mounts

across the rutted road, a few feet on both sides of Obed, hemming him inside.

As one, the two men dismounted and ground-tied their animals. They appeared casual and at ease but they didn't take their gazes from Obed. They appeared to be about six feet tall in their brown riding boots and both weighed well over two hundred pounds. They were big men among the ordinary citizens they met every day. They were somehow diminished standing near Obed, just at an angle so he could not watch both of them at the same time.

"Who are you?" Obed said.

"Who are we? Don't you know who we are, boy?"

"No." Obed shook his head.

"No—what?" the man behind Obed said.

Obed remembered. He nodded quickly. "No, sir. I do not know who you are."

"Well, look at this uniform, boy. At this badge. See this badge? You want to remember this badge so the next time you see slave patrollers, you'll know who they are." One of the patrollers walked all the way around Obed, grinning coldly. "You want to tell us who you are, boy?"

Obed told them his name.

"And what you doin' out here, Obed? Where-at you headed?"

Obed smiled. He said, "I am headed back to New Orleans."

"New Orleans. That's a long trek, boy. You ever been to New Orleans?"

"Yes, sir."

"Learns manners fast, don't he? Been around too. Been to New Orleans. When were you in New Orleans, boy? At a slave auction?"

"No, sir. I am not a slave."

"Look at this, Newt. He's black, all right. And big. But he ain't a slave and he's been all the way to New Orleans. You ever been to New Orleans, Newt?"

"No. I never have, Bobby-Joe. Always wanted to go. Hear they's a lot of whores down in New Orleans. You goin' looking for whores down in New Orleans, Obed?"

"No, sir . . . I hope to get a boat back home."

The two men glanced at each other, restraining smiles of ridicule. Newt's voice was concerned, "A boat? A boat home, eh? Where-at's home, Obed?"

Obed sighed. He was smart enough to know these two men were toying with him, enjoying themselves in a boring job, having a little fun with the black man before they carried out whatever plan they'd had before they even confronted him. He was also smart enough to know he was outnumbered, trapped, and unarmed. He said, "My home is in Senegal, sir."

"Senegal? Don't know that town. You know that town, Bobby-Joe? Where-at is this here Senegal?"

"It is in West Africa, sir," Obed said. Lawmen weren't the most intelligent of men anywhere on earth, but he saw he was dealing with Alabama rednecks who had never been anywhere and who'd had the minimum amount of schooling to permit them to hold their jobs. He caught his breath. Sometimes ignorance can be the most dangerous opponent, the most insidious kind of poison. He spoke carefully. "It's a country in West Africa."

"Just goin' to walk into New Orleans and catch a boat and go back to Africa, eh?"

The other slave patroller laughed. "Hey, Bobby-Joe, I'm in favor of that. Jungle bunny going back to Africa."

Bobby-Joe nodded. "Hell, Newt, maybe we ought to let him go."

Newt laughed. "Maybe he could take a couple thousand niggers with him on his boat."

"Likely, he could." Newt walked around Obed again, pretending to study him carefully. "Tell me, boy. What would your master have to say about you just takin' off to New Orleans and Senegal?"

"I have no master, sir," Obed said. He forced himself to speak slowly, calmly, trying to conceal the fluttering of panic deep in his belly. "I am here in this country on a visitor's visa. You could prove that—if you would get in touch with the immigration office—"

"Don't tell us how to do our job, Obed."

"No, sir, I do not mean to. I mean no disrespect, sir. To

either of you." Briefly, Obed told them how he had been brought to America on a visitor's visa aboard the *Eagle of the Sea*. He did not mention his recent trouble at Falconhurst. He figured if the patrollers had not heard of this, they would, soon enough.

The two patrolmen were enjoying themselves. They tried not to laugh. "And why would they want to bring you over here as their guest, Obed?"

"So that I could speak to people about slavery. About the wrongs of slavery. But the minister was lost at sea."

This was too delicious to resist, too ridiculous to accept with a straight face. The two lawmen laughed, shaking their heads. "On the wrongs of slavery, eh, Obed? You think slavery is wrong, do you?"

Obed sighed. "When a whole people are enslaved."

"So you're telling us that niggers is human beings, eh? Is that the kind of speech you was going to make?"

Obed shrugged, waiting.

Grinning, his sun-leathered face twisted with his smiling, Newt said, "And who are you that anybody should give a shit what you think of slavery, Obed?"

Obed said, "I am a king."

"A king." They went into rages of laughter.

"In Senegal, I am a king," Obed said.

"And Senegal?" Bobby-Joe said. "That's in West Africa, ain't it?"

Obed drew a deep breath and did not bother to answer.

Bobby-Joe bit back his contemptuous laughter. He said in a mock-apologetic tone, "Well, listen, King Obed. Your Majesty. I'm just afraid Mr. Newt and me are goin' to have to take you in to jail at Talcie City. You go quiet, and nobody gits hurt. You'll be put in jail at Talcie City till your master claims you, or a judge decides what to do about you." He grinned, looking Obed over. "You're one hell of a big buck. Young. Healthy. You'll bring a good price at auction."

Everything spun inside Obed, the sickness in his belly, the fever in his head, the ache of his bones, the sense of despair. He shook his head. "No," he said in a flat dead voice.

At the cold tone of Obed's voice, Newt was alerted to

trouble. Newt heeled around and caught at the rifle buckled in its saddle scabbard. In panic, Obed saw his hope for freedom fleeing. Bobby-Joe, on the other side of him, fought the gun loose at his holster. The games were over. The lawmen had had their fun. It was deadly serious now.

Obed felt the illness flood through him. If these patrollers put handcuffs on him now, he was trapped, caged, without hope. There was no way he could escape those fetters again. He remembered the bite and strength of those metal spancels at Falconhurst.

As Bobby-Joe reached for his handgun, Obed set himself and struck the lawman at the point of his jaw with all the strength in his arm. They could hear the jawbone snap in the silent wilderness. Bobby-Joe sagged and fell forward on his face as though pole-axed.

"Hey!" Newt yelled. Panic as well as command laced his voice. He wasted a moment, staring in disbelief at Bobby-Joe sprawled facedown in the mud. He recovered quickly, heeling around and bringing up the rifle.

In that space of a breath, Obed sprang forward and struck the patroller with all the force in his right shoulder, carrying him backward off his feet. The gun flew from Newt's arms. The two of them toppled hard against Newt's horse. The animal whinnied and reared in panic. Newt was already fighting, swinging his arms and kicking. Obed did not even try to parry the blows. His hands closed on Newt's throat.

Newt went on fighting for some moments, his arms flailing, his movements weakening. His face reddened, his eyes bulging, his tongue thrust out of his mouth. Obed's fingers tightened. Newt's face turned blue and suddenly, with a rattle, Newt died. Obed stayed where he was for some moments, closing his hands on the dead man's throat, expending his terror and rage.

Obed stayed there on his knees for some moments. He'd been taught in English schools to hate murder; he had learned all the laws of self-preservation with his tribe upriver in Senegal. A sense of sickness that had nothing to do with remorse swept over him. He wanted only one thing, to make it to New Orleans and find a ship to Dakar. He had not helped

his cause here. He had added to his peril. Now, as soon as these men were discovered, he had the law on his trail.

Fluttering covies of birds in the underbrush startled him and brought him out of his chilled reverie. He gazed down at the dead man, then he got up and walked over to where Bobby-Joe sprawled across the roadway. The lawman was unconscious. Coldly, Obed knelt beside him. He closed his fingers on Bobby-Joe's throat, tighter and tighter until the breath stopped.

He moved deliberately then, with haste and yet trying not to hurry. He kept listening to sounds along the early-morning roadway. He heard nothing. He led the two horses off the trace into the concealment of the underbrush and tied them. Then he went back up the incline. He bent over and caught the two dead lawmen by the collars of their brown shirts and dragged them off into the thicket. As he moved, he tried to plan ahead to what must be done. He had to buy time before these bodies were found. He had to get as far away from here as possible. The only way to buy himself any time was to conceal the corpses. They would be found. Predatory animals or circling buzzards would lead hunters to them sooner or later.

He plodded through the hammock, dragging the bodies until he came to the brink of the cypress-black creek, deep and swift-moving. He weighted both the bodies with stones and then pushed them out into the current. They bobbled along, half-submerged. One snagged on a log.

He knelt at the bank of the creek. He washed his face with the cold water, scrubbing it with the flat of his palms. He bent forward and drank deeply. After a moment he settled back on his haunches and stared at his wavy reflection in the ebony surface of the water.

Slightly restored at last, he stood up and retraced his steps through the hammock to where he had tied the patroller's horses. He noticed the thick saddlebags on each man's horse. He loosened the buckles and opened them. The smell of food attacked him, along with the scent of leather. Bag lunches were packed in both saddlebags, along with arrest papers, official orders, and other printed matter, including wanted posters.

He took the bags of food in his hands, trembling suddenly with hunger. He ate the food ravenously, ham sandwiches, egg sandwiches, apples, and a distorted slab of apple pie.

He began to feel better, to hope again. There was no question of leaving the horses here; he coudn't do it. He swung up into the saddle of one horse and secured the reins of the other on his saddle.

Holding his breath, he rode up the incline and onto the roadway, heading west again, as swiftly as he could.

XXIII

The horse under him, the saddle between his legs, the miles grinding out beneath him, restored some hope inside Obed. The horse was strong and he kept it moving along the trail at an even canter. He even changed mounts every few hours, trying to keep the animals fresh. The sun stayed steel-bright and white-hot and he made good time, though he rode alertly and listened frequently for travelers on the isolated backroad west.

The trace was flat and winding and he let the stallion have its head for long stretches. He forced himself to stop every so often and sit tense in the saddle to listen. The road led through deep woods and Obed felt lonely and strangely vulnerable. He rode past infrequent dirt farms, fence-enclosed shacks with a few acres of arable land, sometimes owned by freed blacks. He supposed they were freed men of color, but he was afraid to stop because he had no way of knowing how soon the police would be looking for him for murder. He didn't want to be remembered all along this trail. He kept moving.

Obed watched the sun and kept riding west. The seldom-traveled byway was quiet, eroded by rain-hewn gullies and in places almost overgrown with scraggly wire grass and sandspurs, but it was passable, always clearly marked even in the wildest territory. Sometimes there were readable road markers, advising the distance to the nearest town. Obed was especially thankful for these signs. They allowed him to skirt these settlements well in advance, going miles out of his way, but eventually returning to his route.

He came to a cypress-black free-running rill and allowed the horses to drink and to graze the lush grass along the creek bank. He felt drowsy in the unyielding sunlight, but he was afraid to sleep. Houses were fewer than ever, mostly single-room cabins of chinked logs, sometimes with an open dog-trot between the two sections of living quarters. He approached a one-story house that appeared unoccupied, with a dilapidated barn behind it. He secured the horses in this building, gathering up as much dried grass as he could find for fodder. He entered the vacant house and lay down. He stared into the gathering darkness, listening to the bats in the attic and mice in the walls until he fell asleep.

By the end of the second day Obed's ravenous hunger drove him to take risks again that he knew to be dangerous. It wasn't that he'd forgotten any of his hard-learned lessons in dealing with the civilized white man; it was just that the urge to feed his belly pushed everything else from his mind. He was aware of how much weight he had lost. He was conscious of how much leaner and harder and hungrier he was. It got so that he could think of nothing else. . . .

It was nearing two o'clock in the afternoon when he came suddenly upon the unmarked nucleus of a village—a general store, a blacksmith shop, a few unpainted shacks, a large barn that served as a livery stable. Obed skirted the town, tied one of the horses in a hammock to the west of it. Then, holding his breath for long moments at a time without even being aware he was doing it, he rode into the settlement.

He headed the horse directly to the old unpainted barn. The livery-stable sign hung askew above propped-open double doors. Hay spilled from a loft window. He let the horse drink at the watering trough out front. Two middle-aged men sat in the sun, leaning in old wicker-back kitchen chairs against the plank wall of the building. They watched Obed intently for some minutes without speaking. Finally, one of the men let his chair tip forward and he stood up, peering at Obed warily.

"What you want heah, boy?" The man was rail-thin, his straw hat pushed back from freckled brow to balding crown. His run-over boots were dung-streaked. His denim shirt was buttoned tightly at his scrawny neck.

"Are you the owner of this stable, sir?" Obed asked.

When the man nodded, his face still showing no expression, Obed swung down from the saddle. He towered over the stable owner. This gentleman retreated a couple of steps, gaping up at Obed, squinting in the afternoon sunlight.

"Lord a-mighty, boy. You're a big 'un, ain't you?" He turned and spoke across his shoulder, his voice awed. "Luther, you ever see such a gyascutus big buck afore?"

"Never have," Luther said. "He's a big son of a gun, all right."

The stable owner went on staring up at Obed. "What you say you want round here, boy?"

Obed drew deep breath, hiding his panic, but driven by hunger. He spoke in his most respectful tone, recalling the way Memnon talked to white men back at Falconhurst. "My master sent me. He sent me to sell you this horse and saddle. My master says times are bad. He needs the cash till harvesting, he said to tell you, or he would never part with this horse."

The stable owner remained rigid. "Who's your master, boy?"

Obed dug into the crannies of his mind. He said. "A Mr. Hallwell, sir. Yes, sir. Mr. Merrill Hallwell is my master."

The man shook his head. He spat tobacco juice from the corner of his mouth. "Don't recollect no Hallwells round here."

"No, sir. Not around here. Mr. Hallwell, he's a planter, sir. Over near"—and Obed searched his memory again. A town name flared into his mind—"over near Talcie City." Obed smiled, recalling the name hopefully.

"Talcie City." The man scowled. "That's quite a spell from here. A long ride. Talcie City."

Obed drew a deep breath. "Yes, sir. Master Hallwell sent me all this way. He said I was not to sell the horse in Talcie City, or anywhere near it where his friends might know. He's a prideful man, sir. My master. He didn't want folks to know things were so bad for us right now."

The livery stable owner sighed. He had heard this story, or versions of it, more times than he could say offhand. Prideful plantation owners, their slaves and lands mortgaged to the least bit, trying to scrounge for cash to see them through.

He shrugged. "Reckon I might buy a sound animal."

"Oh, he's sound all right, sir," Obed said. He winced. His anxiety was showing.

The man jerked his head. "You let me decide that for myself, boy." He walked close, took the checkrein in his hand. He forced the horse's mouth open and spent some moments checking his teeth. Then he drew his hands down its withers, along its body. He stopped at the rump of the horse and peered at the brand. Without turning, he spoke over his shoulder. "Luther, come here."

Luther got up and joined him at the rump of the horse. The hostler traced his fingers over the scar left by some branding iron.

Obed held his breath. A tension crackled suddenly in the silent afternoon. He could hear the buzz of blue flies at dungheaps.

The stable man said, "This here is a state police horse. Ain't that so, Luther?"

"That there's a state brand, all right," Luther said. He nodded.

Obed straightened. He could run, or he could try to bluff it out. It didn't matter now what he did. These two men were never going to forget the seven-foot black man who rode in on a state police mount. He kept his voice level. "I can explain that, sir."

"I hope you can," Luther said. The livery stable owner merely waited, staring at the big Negro.

"Over at Talcie City," Obed said. "Police auctioned off some of their horses. They had some they wanted to sell off. My master said the horses were going at a good price and he needed a couple. He had a bill of sale and used the horses on the farm, so he never changed the brand."

Luther and the hostler looked at each other. The hostler said, "I'd like the horse, all right. Sound. Young. Good teeth. But I don't want to mess with no stolen animals."

Obed held his breath, taking his biggest gamble of all. If they decided he'd stolen the horse, they were going to yell for the constable anyhow. Yet, he could tell the livery owner coveted the animal. He saw a profit in it. He needed only to be convinced, to be given information he could fall back on if

he were questioned. Obed said, "We bought the horses, sir. . . . Here." He went to the saddlebag, opened it, and took out one of the printed sheets at random. He did not bother looking at it. He folded it carefully and held it out to the stable owner. "Here's a bill of sale, sir."

The hostler scowled slightly, but took the folded sheet of paper. He shook it out and unfolded it. Obed felt the breath sigh out of him. He had gambled and won. The stable man was perusing the paper diligently, but he was holding it upside down. The man couldn't read and Obed had bet that he could not and that his white pride would not let him admit to a Negro that he was illiterate.

At last the man folded the paper and shoved it into the back pocket of his overalls. He nodded. He ran his hand over the police brand again. "Reckon I could doctor that brand good enough to sell it. What you think, Luther?"

"I reckon you'd have to change it. You sure as hell can't sell it with that brand."

The stable owner nodded again. "I'll take the horse. But I'm taking a hell of a chance, even with the bill of sale. I'll give you fifty dollars for the horse and the saddle. No more, boy. Take it or leave it."

Obed nodded and the man counted out the gold eagles.

Even with the money in his pocket, and hunger growling like something wild in his belly, Obed did not approach the general store. He took the money, smiling and bowing. He pushed it into the pocket of his skintight osnaburg pants and backed away, still bowing, still smiling.

When he reached the open road, he turned and walked swiftly until he was out of sight of the town or of any of the curious who had ventured out into the sun to stare at him. When he looked back and could no longer see any people or even the roofs of stores and shacks, he breathed out raggedly and broke into a long, loping run.

It was a long and tiring ten miles to the next general store at the nearest crossroads west. This settlement was even smaller and more dormant than the town where Obed had sold the police horse.

He rode up to the hitching rail outside the general store,

swung down, and looped the reins over the railing. A youthful man in sunbonnet, denim shirt, and cotton pants slouched in a chair. He watched Obed from beneath the brim of his hat but did not speak.

Obed opened the door, sending up a cloud of buzzing flies that settled back on the screen as soon as it slammed shut behind him.

The store smelled good, of leathers and dress goods, of coal oil and chocolate candies. Obed breathed in deeply, pleased by the odors. He looked around in the crowded, vaguely lighted room. At first, he thought the place was untended. Then he saw the stout man in straw hat and blood-streaked apron standing in front of a rear counter. The man held a rifle across his chest. He said only, "Git out, nigger."

Obed shook his head. He spread his hands to show he was unarmed. He said, "Please, sir, I need to buy—"

"Don't give a shit in hell what you need to buy. Don't sell to niggers. Don't allow them inside my store. A man sells to niggers, they stink his place up. White folks smell niggers in a store, they stop comin' in. Sell to niggers, run off the white trade. I ain't doin' that. Now, go on, git out of here."

Obed started to speak again, but when the man crooked his finger on the trigger of the gun and hefted it around, its barrel fixed on Obed's belly, reason prevailed. There was no way to talk to this violent-tempered white man. Obed backed out, the door slamming behind him.

Obed backed down the step to the ground. Empty-bellied, he went to his horse. He glanced up at the youth slouched in the rocking chair. Obed said, "He would not sell to me."

The boy shrugged. "I could of told you that. Mr. Brinson has got his ways. He hates niggers. Won't have 'em on his place."

"He told me." Obed exhaled heavily. "How far west to the next town?"

The youth shrugged. "Ten mile or so. But it ain't no better over there. You gonna have to git some white man to do your buying for you. They won't sell to you over there, either."

Obed gripped the reins a moment. Then he shoved his hand into his pocket and drew out a gold piece. The youth stared at it.

"Where in hell did a black like you git that kind of money?"

"It is mine," Obed said. "I will pay you a dollar if you'll buy some things in this store for me."

The boy smiled. "Let me have the money. Tell me what you want."

Obed tossed the boy the gold eagle. The boy caught it as he might snatch a fly in the air and sat gazing at it. He hadn't seen too many coins like that in his life. He knew it to be worth almost twenty dollars.

Obed said, "I need some cheese and some crackers. Maybe a tin of some kind of meat and something to open it with. And I need some matches. A hunting knife, and a five-pound bag of oats for my horse."

The boy appeared hardly to listen as Obed listed his needs. He pushed himself up and went yawning into the store. In a few moments he returned. He handed Obed the oats, which he tied behind his saddle. He put the food into the saddlebag. Then the boy tossed him a leather-handled hunting knife gleaming with newness.

"All right," the boy said. He yawned again and returned to the rocking chair. "There's your things. You best git on down the road afore old man Brinson comes chargin' out here and runs you off."

He stood beside the chair, grinning vacantly down at Obed. Obed said, "Haven't you forgotten something, sir?"

The boy smiled tautly. "I don't think so. You best git. Ole Brinson is riled. If he comes out, he comes out shooting."

"My change," Obed said. He felt his rage against all whites concentrated in a fierce, white-hot hatred for the grinning boy staring down at him from the store stoop. He stepped around the hitch rail and went up on the porch in one fluid motion. The youth went pale and tried to set himself, but what he least expected happened. Obed slipped the flat of his blade under the youth's belt, and drew him up on his toes.

"'You gone git yourself kilt," the boy gasped.

"Maybe. But not in time to save your carcass, Mister. Now, I can turn this blade up and slit your gullet, or I can turn it over and cut . . . you make up your mind."

The youth cursed him, but still held up on his toes, he drew

the change from his pocket and handed it to Obed, cursing him. Obed slipped the knife from beneath the boy's belt, dropped a silver dollar at his boots, and leaped from the porch to the ground. He swung up into the saddle as he heard the screen door of the store slam shut. He supposed Brinson had run, armed, out to the stoop, but he didn't look back to see.

He was at the town limits before he allowed the horse to slow from its headlong gallop. He felt no sense of relief or triumph that he'd escaped before Brinson started shooting.

That sense of wrong flooded through him, depressing him. He'd made every mistake so far known to man in the flight of a black. He had no hope that he'd soon be forgotten in that crossroads settlement. When the state police, the slave patrollers, or a posse from Falconhurst rode into town, Brinson and the boy would take great delight in recalling the seven-foot Negro who had disturbed the peace and threatened a white man's life.

He slowed the horse, sick at the stomach. He was no longer hungry, but felt maybe food would restore his spirits, give him hope again. He cut off a hunk of cheese, opened a box of soda crackers, and ate, slouched in the saddle.

A new sign in red ink, set on a board and nailed to a post beside the trace, caught his eye. He halted the horse and, twisted in the saddle, read the newly printed wanted poster.

RENEGADE BLACK
DANGEROUS RUNAWAY ROGUE NEGRO
Seven feet tall. Dark brown in color.
Speaks with English Accent.
Thinks he is Royalty.
Will Resist Arrest.
$1,000 REWARD FOR CAPTURE
AND RETURN
Contact Mr. Hammond Maxwell
FALCONHURST PLANTATION
Benson, Alabama
Reward Paid in Gold.

Panic flooded down through Obed. He wanted to ride away at top speed. But suddenly he didn't know where to turn. If

these signs had beaten him here, they would mark the trails and the towns ahead of him. He did not doubt that Hammond Maxwell believed Obed was on his way to New Orleans. By the time he got to the crescent city, those reward posters would be waiting for him. Seven feet tall. English accent. Reward paid in gold. Where could he hide?

Sick at his stomach, he sat and stared at the sign. He wondered if the bodies of the slain slave patrollers had been found yet. Was there another wanted poster out, or on its way? He remembered Miz Lucretia Borgia and her warning to him. The whites controlled everything, not because laws were made for them, but because white people were the law.

All he wanted was somehow to find a ship, to work his way across the Atlantic. And yet, even the trail to New Orleans was barred to him by these posters, by the laws of white men. God knew, he'd seen enough of the evil and trickery of white people to last him a lifetime. All he wanted to do was to escape them, and he didn't see how he could do that.

That wanted poster was burned into his brain. He tried to eat; he could not. He tried to plan ahead, and he could not. He could see only that red sign. Reward Paid in Gold.

When he glimpsed a farmhouse ahead, he left the road and picked his way through the thickets, even when he had to lead his horse. He was afraid of being seen now by anybody.

Nightfall seemed to close in on him with breathless suddenness. He wasn't ready for darkness. He had to find a place to hide. He saw a lamplight in a shack window ahead and left the roadway in the darkness.

He had to dismount and lead the horse through the trees and undergrowth. He tried to stay near the trail, but this was impossible because there was no way he could foresee its serpentine twists and turns. He knew only one thing. It was getting darker and he was getting lost in an unknown wilderness.

He started through a pine hammock, where walking and leading the horse were at least easier. He had to think, to plan ahead, to decide which way to turn now that his trail was blistered with wanted posters. New Orleans suddenly seemed a long way away. Another planet.

He heard something and stopped dead in his tracks. Sweated, he gripped the lines of his horse.

He scowled, empty-bellied and more troubled than ever. The sound he heard was laughter. Laughter? Out here? Was his mind playing tricks on him now?

After a long time he moved forward again, walking stealthfully and listening. He glimpsed the glow of a campfire. He must have wandered farther from the trail than he'd believed, or it had wound away from him as he picked his way through the forest.

He walked up on a knoll and stared through the trees at the campfire. Suddenly he heard a rustling noise from the undergrowth. It came from all sides of him. He grabbed his hunting knife and set himself, but he was already too late. Four Negroes surrounded him. They were armed and they came from every direction. They had heard him. They had trailed him. They had trapped him.

Obed stood, unmoving.

XXIV

For a long time in the night forest a strange and fragile stillness pervaded everything. Suddenly there was no sound of laughter from around the campfire, beasts and small animals of the thickets poised, silent. The four Negroes stood with their guns fixed on Obed, but they did not speak. They seemed scarcely to breathe.

He stood, holding the reins of his horse. How insane this was. He had eluded white men all these days and nights to be captured by armed blacks. There was something nightmarish about it. Obed felt the hackles quiver at the nape of his neck.

"Are you working for white men?" Obed asked at last.

His speaking seemed to release the blacks. They stepped closer. One of them said, "Are you?"

Obed laughed. "No. I have been running. For days."

The blacks did not smile. They crowded in, numbers giving them a sense of power against his size. Too, they had guns. One of them took the reins from Obed's hand. He released the leathers willingly.

"We'll just take your guns too," one of his captors said.

Obed shrugged. "The only guns I have are on the saddle or in the saddlebag. Take them."

"Why don't we just walk into the campfire area," one black said. "We can get a look at you."

"I want no trouble," Obed said.

"Well, Brother, you may have it whether you want it or not," a black said. "We'll let Billy Panther decide. . . . We may have to kill you. We can't let anything stop us."

"You let me go on my way," Obed said. "And I'll make

no trouble for you. I'll forget I saw you. . . . You can even keep the horse."

"Shut up," a black ordered. "We tole you. We'll let Billy Panther look at you. He'll know what to do."

Obed sighed and nodded. He walked just ahead of his armed captors up the incline and through a copse of pines to where a fire had been built in a pit. Its crimson shadows danced on the faces of the silent people around them. Six black men sprawled on the ground. Near them sat four Negro women. On the other side of the fire crouched three men in buckskin. They were not Negroes and they were not white. Obed was looking at his first Indians.

One of the blacks bumped Obed with his gun butt, ordering him to stop a few feet from the fire pit. The black said with a tone of awe in his voice, "You were right, Billy Panther. There was somebody out there. Your ears are plumb sharp."

"I didn't hear him. I sensed him." Billy Panther shook off his handwoven blanket and stood up across the fire pit. The Indian was only a few inches taller than five feet and yet, Obed saw in wonder, in his way Billy Panther was as massive and unusual as himself. He was a man who stood out in any company. His head was large, his straight black hair parted in the middle and plastered down the sides almost to his shoulders. His features were coarse, thick at the brow, across the nose, at the nostrils, lips, and chin. His shoulders were almost four feet across, bulging with muscles. His chest was keglike, and his legs were great muscled hams, set on delicate feet.

Billy Panther came around the rim of the fire, striding effortlessly, like the cat he was named for. He stopped a few feet from Obed and looked him over. "Who are you? What are you doing out here?"

"I ran away from Falconhurst." Obed told them quickly about his flight. He added that he had slain two slave patrollers, hoping this might prove to them he was not an enemy of theirs if they were runaways.

"Then where do you go?"

"I am on my way to New Orleans. Today I saw the first wanted posters. I am not certain I can make it to New Orleans, or if I can hide, even if I get there."

Billy Panther stared at him for some moments without speaking. He said in a mild tone, "You would be a hard one to hide, even in a crowd. I would not like to have to hide you."

"Nor I you," Obed said. This was as near they would come to exchanging compliments. They were different from other men; in many ways they were better, bigger, stronger, maybe even smarter.

"No. We can't hide, you and I," Billy Panther said. "So we must learn to fight to stay alive, eh?" He paced a moment. "I don't know what we can do about you."

"Let me go. You'll hear no more of me. I swear it. Keep my horse."

Billy Panther almost smiled. "We can use a horse, all right. If we get hungry enough, we'll eat it. . . . We'll take the horse, no mattter what we decide to do about you."

"I want no trouble."

"Sometimes the man who wants no trouble draws it as horse dung draws flies," Billy Panther said.

Obed shrugged and waited. Billy Panther stared at him for a long time. The blacks stirred restively. Only the Indians remained calm and unmoving, unmoved across the fire pit.

"Where we are headed, we must not be followed, "Billy Panther said. It was as if he mulled this over aloud, to his own counsel, rather than speaking to anyone around him. "If we let you go, you may well go on to New Orleans. Or, you may be trapped in a hour. White men are tricky and without compassion. If they want information from you, you'll be glad to give it to them before they are through with you."

"Information about you people," Obed said.

"It is a chance we can't take. I'm sorry. If we trapped you, white men will trap you. Sooner or later. It is only a matter of time."

Since he had been admitting this ugly truth in his own mind for some days now, Obed did not bother to contradict the Indian. He said only, "If you do not tell me, I will not know where you are going."

Billy Panther made a slashing downward gesture. "You will know where you saw us. White men are cruel, but they are not dumb. They know where we are trying to go. They'll

know what trails we must follow from here. No. Whatever we do, we cannot let you go from this place alive."

Billy Panther turned his back on Obed. He approached two black men and squatted before them. They conversed in whispers for what seemed a dark eternity to Obed. None of the others spoke in all this time. Obed's gaze wandered across the blacks at the fire and then moved to the women huddled together. His eyes touched at them, moved on, and then leaped back, fixed on one girl who looked to be seventeen or eighteen. The pale color of new bronze, she was the loveliest creature he had ever seen.

His lips parted slightly, he stared openly at the girl, forgetting everyone else around them. The other women were comely enough, he supposed. He didn't check to see, for this one was far more interesting and eye-compelling than anyone around her. She stirred his imagination. She was younger, prettier, more fragile-looking. These others looked like ordinary blacks one might see at almost any southern plantation, but the bronze-colored girl was different. She sat with them, yet she didn't belong among them. If she were a slave, he was certain she was trained to work in the plantation mansion. There was a softness about her, and that softness and the very miracle of her existence in this strange, nightmarish place stunned Obed. Not one of his queens or princesses back in Senegal was lovelier or daintier than this slave girl. She wore a soft veil of some kind over her head and shoulders against the night chill and her face was a cameo against it; the fire glittered in her black eyes like illumined jewels. He could see the outline of her high-standing breasts under her dress, the lines of her legs shapely under her shapeless skirt. He tried to look away, to think about something else, but he could not. His gaze kept returning to her in the hard silence and, once, their eyes met, touching briefly before she looked down at her uncallused hands locked in her lap.

He was aware that Billy Panther had walked, on his delicate cat's feet, back to him and stood peering up at him as though their eyes met levelly. For that instant, still intoxicated with the slave girl's loveliness, Obed didn't care about the dour Indian and his unyielding gaze. Looking at the

beautiful slave, he had forgotten fear, forgotten the threat to his life, forgotten the guns fixed on him. It took him some seconds now to reorient himself, to realize where he was.

"We have talked," Billy Panther said in that measured tone. It was as if the language were strange to him and he chose one word at a time, like a pebble, tasted it, and then uttered it in his precise way. "We are reasonable men. We have our problems. You do not make them easier. But we do not want to kill you unless we have to."

"Thank you," Obed said.

Billy Panther remained unrelenting. "But we will kill you if that time comes when it cannot be put off."

"You have nothing to fear from me. I hate the white men. I am trying to escape them."

"We have talked of this." Billy Panther drew a deep breath as though he were not entirely convinced in his own mind yet. "It is that we have decided. If you go quietly with us, we will take you to the border with us."

"The border?"

"The border of Spanish Florida. If you entered Spanish Florida, and left us there, you could cross west to New Orleans. It would be safer for you. It would be safe for us."

"I did not know of this place," Obed said. "Spanish Florida."

"It is land held for many generations by the Spanish," Billy Panther said. "My home is there. My village. My people. Once, we lived in northern Alabama, but General Jackson drove my people south into Spanish Florida. Those of us he did not choose to kill."

"Why are you up here?" Obed said.

Billy Panther merely stared at him. "Do we have your answer? Will you go quietly among us into Spanish Florida?"

Obed's gaze stole back to the girl across the fire. He nodded his head.

"I cannot think of anything better I could do," he said.

"Not and stay alive," Billy Panther agreed. He turned and nodded his massive head toward the armed blacks. They put down their guns in a small cart which appeared to hold the worldly belongings of the entire group. Then they sat down with the other blacks. Billy Panther said, "You may sit with

them if you wish. Do not think we are not watching you every minute. Peril makes us suspicious of our loved ones. We fear every stranger. It is the only way we can stay alive in this land."

One of the blacks led the horse into the darkness, removed the saddle, and ground-tied the animal so he could graze during the night. Obed looked at the group of black men, the pride of women, and across from them, the four Indians, withdrawn and silent. He chose a place at the rim of the black males, nearest where the women sat. From here he could glimpse the lovely profile of the girl. It seemed he could ask no more in this strange night.

"Why are you here like this?" Obed asked the black man nearest him. "Why are you going into this Spanish Florida?"

"To be free," the man answered.

"You will be free in Spanish Florida?"

"Yes. It is as Billy Panther says. The Spanish rule very lax. There is a governor at a place called Pensacola. There is another governor at Amelia Island. There is no governor, no army, between these two places. It is a distance of four hundred miles. Anyway, the Spanish do not want to enslave us. When we cross the border, we will be safe. We will be free."

Obed heard this declaration of Spanish friendship for blacks with grave suspicion. He'd endured whites as avowed enemies for too long to believe suddenly that *some* whites were better than others and so could be trusted. He did not believe this. Better to hold all whites as mortal enemies rather than find oneself trusting false friends. But these runaway blacks believed all that Billy Panther had told them about Spanish Florida, they looked forward to it as an Eden, and they rejoiced at being free once they crossed that border south. To them the evil of their past was behind them, and they needed to fear slavery no longer. He looked at them, the firelight in the dark faces. They sprawled about that fire, joyous, expectant, full-bellied, all their trust deposited in the squat, dour-looking Billy Panther.

"What is in this for Billy Panther?" he asked.

The man peered at him. "He is our guide. He will be paid when he gets us to the Negro fort."

"The Negro fort?"

"It is a place for free Negroes. On the Apalachicola River. Billy Panther say it was built by the British. It's a place where blacks can run from slavery in the South."

The other men, who had sat withdrawn, now joined in the conversation. They told Obed they were runaways. "We are all jus' field hands. None of us is smart. But we want to be free. Billy Panther say he can take us on Indian paths south. So far, we been followin' the paths."

"That girl. There. With the shawl. She's not a field hand," Obed said.

"That be Elicia. She was Miss Maude Lillian's body servant. In the big house. She the only house servant what joined the rebellion."

"A rebellion?" Obed prompted. "You rebelled against your white masters?"

Suddenly they were all talking at once, the words pouring out. They had been slaves at Golden Leas Plantation. The name struck Obed like a fist in the belly. He remembered Golden Leas all right. The young white woman who had screamed hysterically at the sight of him. The hounds. The escape. He would never forget Golden Leas.

"We raised up against them," one of the black men said. "Maybe we never would have, but Caleb and Moses came back from chasing down a black man who had stopped at Golden Leas and begged for food. The masters of Golden Leas had failed. The black man had kilt their hounds and left them hanging in a tree. . . . The masters turned back."

"Something about that lone black man stopping the masters cold. It got inside all of us. It kept us stirred. Riled. Then the masters were going to whup some of us, just as a warning. They was raging 'cause that stranger had kilt their dogs and got away. They was goin' to take their rage out on us. . . . But we just kind of went wild. We kept sayin' to each other, if that one man alone could stop the white masters, we all could stop them."

They all took turns telling about it, telling what they recalled of that blazing inferno they'd created. Golden Leas had burned all night. The rich warehouses of fresh-picked cotton sent gray smoke billowing toward heaven itself. Buildings

were gutted, they imploded, they crumpled in upon themselves and fed the wild crimson flames. Blacks ran everywhere with torches and new fires burned, marking the destruction of every abode on the planter's lands, his mansion, his barns, stables, and even the shacks of his slaves. Nothing was spared. It was the end of Golden Leas. The white masters shot at the blacks as long as they could, but when their guns were empty, they were set upon and slain. Not a white person survived the night. When a black saw a white face, stark in the firelight, he attacked it in a frenzy, wiping it from the earth forever.

Most of the two hundred slaves, freed, ran north, hoping to make it above the Mason-Dixon line to that abolitionist promised land of honey. This was not what these slaves wanted. They had heard horror stories from blacks who had escaped north and returned voluntarily to escape the new kind of hell that awaited them in that cold, hostile land. In the North they were treated as freaks, curiosities, of interest for a day or so, and then abandoned. There was no help, no food, no place to live unless the blacks had money to purchase it.

"It is different with the Indians," one of the blacks said. "Slaves that are smart run south to Spanish Florida and the Indian tribes that have been driven down there by American armies. The Indians take them in with them, or permit them to stake land and farm it. Negroes are not bothered by the Indians, or by the Spanish. There are Indians who have lived all their lives in Florida and say they have never seen a Spaniard."

"How did you find Billy Panther?" Obed asked. He saw that the Indians were watching them passively from across the fire pit. The Indians moved only to toss another dry log on the fire.

"Billy Panther, he found us. After the fire, all those who wanted to go south ran off and hid in the swamps. We sent word that we needed help to get to Florida, and Billy Panther and his men came. Billy Panther is a tribal chief. He has a village in North Florida. He makes money by guiding people to the Negro kingdom. The British established the place and they pay him for every Negro he guides into the fort."

The runaways slept beside the fire pit. Billy Panther and his Indians kept to themselves, watchful beside the log blaze. Billy woke Negroes during the night, setting a constant night watch. Obed was not trusted for this duty and so got to sleep undisturbed. But it was not a quiet night in the forest. Panthers screamed, a blood-curdling cry like a woman in intolerable pain. Owls hooted in the pine trees. Small animals skittered in the underbrush. There were life and death struggles in the darkness, animal wails of distress, and cries of triumph. Obed was exhausted both physically and mentally. The stress of tension had drawn him taut. It seemed he wakened to every sudden cry in the darkness and for long moments he would lie trembling.

A thick moist green fog enshrouded the woodlands when Obed awoke at dawn. When he opened his eyes, he felt strangely fevered and lost. It took him some time to realize where he was. It was another morning in his flight from Falconhurst, and he was still alive and he was among strangers. The ground was chilled and his body ached. The fire had been allowed to die during the hours before dawn. When he sat up, he saw that the rest of the encampment was awake and ready to march. They drank black coffee and ate dry bread and tossed any leftovers into the pit. The pit was covered over, then the scarred place was carefully camouflaged with dead dried weeds and gathered tree limbs petrified with age. By the time Billy Panther's men were through, there was no sign of the huge gouged fire pit.

Elicia was the first person Obed's gaze sought and focused upon as soon as he was fully awake. He found her standing among the women, her shawl about her slender shoulders. She was even more beautiful by daylight than she had been in the fireglow.

Aye God, she was beautiful. Obed's lips twisted into a wry smile at her loveliness. For a long beat their gazes met and held. He saw her fresh young face flush warmly. He was strongly conscious of the way his own heart beat faster. He felt somehow foolish, like a young boy in love for the first time. But, all in all, it was not an unpleasant condition. Nature had its own way of stirring hope in your insides, even in hell.

The march began. Walking in the pack of black men, Obed wondered about the trail south. He soon learned that the blacks had not exaggerated in their praise of the Indian guide. Billy Panther did follow Indian paths. These dim passages were almost concealed from view and yet marked clearly when one learned how to look for them. These broken lanes wound through the deepest heart of the uninhabited forests.

Billy Panther assigned one of his Indians to watch the country behind, another to walk point in the territory ahead. When these scouts came in at noon, both carried squirrel, rabbits, and opossum on their belts. The trek halted in a pine hammock long enough to eat well of hot stew and biscuits made of flour, salt, and spring water. The blazing sun filtered through the trees about them.

"I done a lot of walking," one black said. "In white man's coffles. I still walking, still don't know where I going, but at least ain't no shackle on my ankles. I walk free. I ain't chained."

"Amen."

"Praise the Lord, Brother."

"And praise Brother Billy Panther too."

Billy Panther laughed, that dark coarse face twisting. "You don't have to praise me. I get paid. Every one of you is worth money to me."

Obed's admiration for Billy Panther grew and intensified as the day wore on. The red guide kept his party together and he kept them moving. He did not allow stragglers. He wanted as little conversation as possible because sound carried in the woods. He was kindly but he was firm. He appeared to know what he was doing every minute. His sharp mind seemed to plan ahead for any unforseen problem. He reminded the blacks that it was not his whim, but their own safety that dictated how swiftly and silently they glided through the forests, how few signs they left in their wake for trackers.

In the middle of the afternoon, plodding in the unremitting sun, Obed became aware of Elicia. She had quietly moved away from the other women and walked beside him, striding. He smiled down at her.

They spoke in whispers. "It was you, wasn't it?" Elicia said as if he somehow followed the train of her thought.

He smiled, his brow tilting. "What have I done?"

She nodded her head and gave him another devastating smile that imploded in his loins. He wondered if she had any inkling of how beautiful she was, what her smiling could do to an unarmed man. She said in that soft whisper, "It was you who came to Golden Leas that day. I was just inside the parlor window from where Miss Maude Lillian sat. I saw you walk up to the edge of the porch. I watched her and I watched you. I heard Miss Maude Lillian scream. She didn't have to do that. She loved to make trouble, to stir her brothers and her father against the slaves, or against strangers. Anything to rouse excitement. She didn't scream because she was frightened or because she feared you. I've seen her with men. Black and white. She screamed because she was spoiled rotten, and bored. I hated her."

Obed shrugged. "Well, you are free of her now."

"Yes. I'm free. I will be. In the Negro kingdom, I'll be free. But it's because you were brave—against the Golden Leas white men and their dogs—that stirred the slaves to rebel."

"And you were the only house servant to join the uprising?"

"Yes. When it started, I ran out of the big house to join them. The white people thought I'd gone insane with fear. I was with the rebels from the first. I helped put fire to torches. I helped set fires all over the farm."

He laughed. "And you look so dainty and ladylike."

She drew a deep breath. "I am willing to fight for what I want."

"And what do you want now?"

"I want to be free."

"It may not be easy down here. This is a wild country. Without law."

"I don't ask ease. I look forward to a new life. That's what I want. I don't care what it costs me. Hardships don't frighten me."

He grinned. "I do not think you are frightened of anything."

"That's not true. I'm—afraid of you."

"Why would you be afraid of me?"

"Because. I look at you and I see you and my heart beats

fast and I'm afraid at the same time. But I'm most afraid because I also see you when you're not with me."

"If that is a sickness," Obed said. "We have both come down with it."

XXV

Billy Panther strode at that unrelenting pace of the great cat at the head of the runaways. All day they followed the dark trails south across forests and swamps. By night they set guards and slept fitfully. They were nearing the border now, Billy Panther told them, and the least of the blacks could smell the heady aroma of that brew they'd never tasted—freedom. They talked very little on the dim paths. There was mostly the sluff-sluff sound of tired bare feet on the forest flooring.

After that first afternoon, to Obed's delight and rising excitement, Elicia abandoned the women's section of the troop and walked beside him. The females were permitted a slower pace near the rear of the lines, and walking with Obed meant Elicia had to take longer strides, keep moving at a faster cadence. She did not complain. When he looked down at her, he found her smiling. She looked forward expectantly. She truly did not care what hardships she had to endure. She was going to have what she had always wanted with all her heart. She was going to be free.

Obed felt a sense of protectiveness surge through him when he looked down at Elicia at his side. None of the field hands or their women could understand how rugged this was on a young girl trained only to do the lightest chores as a rich woman's personal maid. At times he found her eyes haggard, even when she smiled. Dust streaked the lovely smooth surface of her cheeks. He wanted to take her up in his arms to carry her. He wanted to ask Billy Panther to allow her to ride Obed's horse.

He did nothing because he knew he could not. They were all in this together, the blacks and their Indian guides all shared the privations equally. Nobody asked the least special privilege. They were human beings and they grumbled, but none rebelled. Sometimes in the dark night, they woke up reluctantly, swearing, but they stood guard. They kept walking in Billy Panther's wake when they were exhausted. They looked forward to one thing, a new life at the Negro fort somewhere in Spanish Florida.

He exhaled heavily. If he asked special privileges for Elicia, he might well turn Indians and blacks against him, and most certainly he would lose Elicia's warm nearness. She was making an inhuman effort to keep these people from knowing how human she was. She would hate him if he tried to make it easier for her.

He could only watch her and admire her, and feel his desire for her growing inside him. As they neared the unmarked border between the States and Spanish Florida, he felt a growing sense of loss. Billy Panther had told him he could turn west on Florida roads all the way to New Orleans, safe from pursuit of lawmen or slave traders. This had seemed a chance devoutly to be wished, until Elicia came and walked beside him, and smiled at him and infrequently touched his hand and allowed him to lift her easily into his arms and swing her across rills and swift-rushing streams.

On the afternoon of the third day after Obed had been forced to join the fleeing slaves, he walked beside Elicia, talking nothings in low whispers, nonsense really, anything to keep her from thinking about the unrelenting march, her torn and bleeding feet, her growing exhaustion. He became aware that something was amiss—the lines had slowed and then stopped in the blaze of sunlight.

He was at least a foot taller than the biggest man among the marchers. He could see Billy Panther far ahead in the lush undergrowth. The Indian had stopped walking and was talking with another guide. Obed recognized the man as the point for the troop; this scout had come running back along the trail and now spoke urgently with his chief.

Obed touched Elicia's arm reassuringly, smiled at her, and

then pushed his way through the stalled lines to where Billy Panther held counsel with his scout.

"What's the matter?" Obed said.

Billy Panther at first threw Obed a look of annoyance, then he relented. Obed was a giant among them, physically magnificent. Even if he were a stranger, he had joined in with this company of fugitives and become a willing part of them. When there was trouble, Billy Panther had learned the hard way, one can always use a strong arm for support.

"Three farmers. We've come within four or five miles of some farms. These three white men are armed. They are out hunting."

"They do not hunt quail or rabbit or opossum," the point said.

"They know Indians sometimes cross through here, as well as runaway blacks. These whites are looking for excitement. Sometimes they hide out along here and kill any Indians or Negroes passing through. It is a sport with them."

Billy Panther moved quickly and yet decisively. He called two of the younger and stronger blacks. He armed them and himself with long rifles from the cart. He spoke to Obed. "The four of us will go quietly and try to flush these white men out. You will keep the party hidden and silent here until you hear from us."

Obed nodded and then said, "I will do as you say, Billy Panther. I admire your leadership. But, most humbly, I suggest I could be of greater value to you than hiding with the women and marchers."

"Oh? You know better how to handle this matter than I?"

"I did not say that, Billy Panther."

"I'm glad, because we have a bad problem here. We are near the Spanish border. But we are still in the United States territory. We cannot kill these white men unless we have to. This is the kind of border skirmish that the United States government is eagerly looking for. They even try to provoke them. If they can say Indians came across the border and slew innocent farmers, then they have the excuse they are looking for to invade across the border and murder whole villages of Indians."

"What will you do?"

Billy Panther exhaled heavily, impatiently. "We are wasting time. What I will try to do is surprise them, drive them away without killing them if I can, if only long enough for our people to pass through here at great speed."

Obed nodded. "That is most wise, Billy Panther. But I hope you will give me guns and two of the young black men. And the horse."

Billy Panther stared at him. "What could you do that we cannot?"

"Nothing." Obed shook his head vigorously. "But we might support you. We might help you drive them away without killing them."

"Oh. And how would you do that?"

"You and the men with you will carry out whatever plan you have. You will get as close to the armed whites as you plan. When you engage them, the three of us will come racing in. I'll ride the horse. We'll make the noise of twenty men. We will trap them between us and our gunfire."

Billy Panther considered the plan without wasting time. His full lips twisted faintly and he nodded. Obed selected two young men, and the three of them took rifles and ammunition from the cart. Billy Panther spoke tersely with the point. He said to Obed, "Dog Watson says the farmers come from the east. That means their farms are in that direction. You should move quietly and swiftly, far out to the east so that when you come in behind them, you will cut them off from their homes."

Obed did not ride the horse. He led the animal as he and the two young blacks loped a mile to the east before they turned south again through the thick woods. Obed felt a sense of excitement he had not felt since he had quelled an assault of a neighboring tribe of slave hunters along the Senegal. It was a hellish thing. Men relished battle. He even wondered if there would come that time when men used their brains instead of their weapons. He doubted it. To slay your enemy and fuck your women and make more money than your neighbor—these three urges drove men and had since they lived in caves, and likely still would be driving them if and when they returned to caves.

They moved as stealthily as possible through the thick high

ground. There were few sounds. Even birds and small animals seemed paralyzed and silent for the moment. The two blacks whispered that their names were Cal and Horn. They thanked him for choosing them to fight with him.

There was no way to know for certain when they had come abreast the concealed farmers and the hunters with Billy Panther. Calculating his distances, Obed would halt his men, mount the horse, and raise himself as high as possible above the undergrowth, searching the thickets for any movement, any sign of men, or the glint of their rifles. He saw nothing, but at the first burst of gunfire, he dropped to his saddle.

He held his arm high, warning his men to silence. Taut in the saddle, he urged the horse forward, signaling his comrades to prepare to fire. He carried the slave patroller's pistol. He cocked it and held it ready at his side.

The clatter of gunfire erupted again ahead of them. Obed waited no longer. He slashed his arm downward savagely, motioning his men forward. He booted his horse and rode noisily through the underbrush. He suddenly screamed like a banshee. His wailing cry of insanity ripped through the greensward and echoed, reverberating in the stillness. He kept screaming, urging his horse faster. Suddenly just behind him, his running companions matched his screaming. Obed fired and then shoved the useless gun into a saddlebag. He rode faster, wailing louder.

He heard an end to the firing. Then he heard yells of warning edged in terror. And then he saw three white men who had thrown their guns away and were running from a copse directly toward him. When they saw Obed on horseback and the rustling of underbrush where might be God only knew how many reinforcements, they halted, heeled, and ran the other way. Sudden gunfire erupted from beyond them, and Billy Panther and his men came out of concealment, wailing and firing.

Terrorized, the white men heeled about and sprinted south, running as fast as they could, slavering in terror. Obed rode after them until a shrill whistle stopped him. He turned back then and met the others at the place where the white men had thrown down their guns and dropped their mason jars of corn whiskey. Billy Panther took up a jar and gulped down a drink

of the white liquid. He winced, but did not shudder. He jerked his head, gathering up the enemy guns.

"The white eyes are scared shitless right now. But their fright will turn to rage. They've lost their guns. They have behaved like women. They will want blood." Billy Panther wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He tried to conceal his pleasure, but triumph crackled in his voice. "We've got to get our people out of here. As quickly as possible."

They moved swiftly along the trail to where the others awaited them. Billy Panther gave orders and the fugitives headed south at double time. Obed returned the horse to the youth assigned to lead it. The boy stripped off the saddle and dropped it into the cart. Obed, Cal, and Horn returned their firearms.

Billy Panther paused for a moment beside the cart. He eyed Obed with a faint warmth glittering in his squinting black eyes. "This is not the first time you have fought an enemy."

"No." Obed smiled. "Not the first. But fighting with you gave me great confidence. It made it the best."

The Indian almost smiled. The corners of his thick mouth quivered. He nodded his huge head. "You are a smart black man."

"You are a smart Indian."

Billy Panther shrugged and turned away, striding toward the front of the lines. "We worked well together today," he said.

Filled with a familiar but hated sense of excitement at the victory, Obed returned to his place among the marchers. He found Elicia and touched her hand in greeting. At first she did not look up at him. When she did raise her face at last, he saw the tears in her eyes. "You could have been killed," she said.

He smiled gently. "Would you have cared, Elicia?"

She shrugged. "Fighting may be hard, but waiting is not easy."

Obed felt his heart pounding crazily. He wanted to grab Elicia up in his arms and swing her about delightedly so that she and the world would see how he felt about her. But he did nothing, only smiled down at her.

* * *

The runaways kept up this double pace for hours. When Billy Panther deemed it safe, they stopped and made hasty camp for the night. They ate bread washed down with creek water and fell asleep without building a fire. Some seemed to sleep where they halted in exhaustion.

The next morning they got up in the earliest dawn, breakfasted, and were ready to march while the dewy chill of the long night still lingered over the fields. A lightening of the sense of dread, a change in the very atmosphere, became apparent to Obed as they walked through the green forest. A vaguely defined trail led them up modest hills through majestic forests of oak, hickory, and magnolia. In places the tree canopies arched together to shut out the sun. There was a new lightness, a languor in the air, a sweetness of odors not present before. Obed walked with an almost unconsciously lighter step and he saw the fugitives smiling at each other, walking with a springing pace, a new hope.

Obed was not surprised when Billy Panther passed back the word that somewhere in the past hours they had crossed the unmarked border between the slave states and Spanish Florida. The sunshine glittered brightly, the air warmed them, the sky was a deep blue, the clouds sharply defined. It was abruptly like a different world. Obed found himself praying to the gods of his ancestors that it was truly a better world.

They reached a small stream, and instead of fording it, Billy Panther led them down into it. They walked in it for miles, splashing like children, the cold water refreshing them and massaging their legs as it leaped down its narrow course over slick pebbles and through thick hedges of wild fern. Obed walked closely beside Elicia or at her heels where the creek narrowed. Elicia was exhausted, trembling with weariness. She picked her way through the rushing waters as if afraid she would fall in her fatigue. Obed supported her arm as much as he could.

Billy Panther came up out of the deep-cut rill and stood on the bank, watching the blacks, triumphant. His voice was exultant. "We leave the trail here. We go to my town now. We have made it."

As the black people came awkwardly up out of the stream,

Billy Panther lifted them, patted them on the back, or spoke in warm encouragement. "Soon we will rest," he told them.

When Obed came out of the creek, Billy Panther stopped him with his hand on Obed's arm. "We will cross a road after we leave Panther Town. When you are ready to leave, you can go west on the trail. It is a long way, but it will take you to New Orleans. . . . I have learned an admiration for you in these days, and I wish you well." He smiled. "I want you to take your horse with you when you go."

When they walked out of a hammock into a clearing near a high-heaped Indian mound, Obed stopped walking, shocked at his first glimpse of Billy Panther's town. Into Obed's mind leaped a comparison between this clutter of open huts and the camps of the most primitive of the blacks in Africa. These abodes lined a hardpacked trail enclosed by trees. The houses were built of hand-scraped posts, roofed by cabbage palmetto fronds woven and secured with thonged logs every few feet. To weatherproof these places in bad weather, the Indians used every sort of wood and scrap lumber for walls and windbreaks. There were planks from wagon beds, tail gates, ship plankings, stolen doors laid against the uprights. Some of the houses were on stilts. Most walls were removed during the summer months. Before each house stood a mortar with its double-ended pestle for grinding corn. The living spaces were surrounded by scrawny, ill-tended gardens, small stands of corn, and milk cows staked in grass plots. Chickens, dogs, and children ran everywhere.

There was no single mode of dress or design about the living abodes. These Indians were all fugitives; none was native to the area. They were the remnants of dozens of splintered, decimated tribes, including Oconee, Apalachicola, Hitchiti, Yamassee, Yudi, and Micosuki. They had been defeated and driven in headlong flight by Jacksonian campaigns in the southern states. They came from various tribes with unlike customs. They made little effort to meld their ways; all were trying only to survive, against starvation, illness, and the continual threat of hit-and-run attacks by United States militia from north of the Spanish border. They lived in a kind of crazed panic. They had been unable to adapt their

ways to the white man's in three hundred years; they could not do it now.

Indians came, striding, running, hurrying from everywhere, the open huts, the fields, and the thick woods beyond. Braves, hunters, farmers, old men, and youths appeared as if some bell had rung, summoning them. All greeted Billy Panther warmly, with the respect and regard due an admired chieftain. Billy Panther sat in counsels with Billy Bowlegs, John Blunt, Wildcat, Osceola. This meant nothing to the fugitive slaves, or to Obed at that moment, but it made Panther revered among his own people and feared and despised by the whites above the border.

The day turned into a long celebration, with mason jars of white corn whiskey passed around. Food was prepared by the women, all working together. Ears of corn roasted, potatoes were pit-baked under a layer of earth, wild hog was cooked on a slow-turned spit. Soon the Indians were drunk, Billy Panther the loudest and most profanely drunk of them all. Some of the black men drank with their red hosts, but they could hold their liquor better.

Obed learned that Billy Panther had at least three wives, none of whom seemed to resent or detest her rivals, and a dozen dark-skinned offspring. These children ranged from toddlers to teenagers. They seemed to love Billy Panther in their silent, intense fashion, each wanting his attention and affection if only for a few moments at a time. After drinking for a while, Billy Panther sprawled against an upright, small children clambering over him like ants on a slice of picnic ham.

Laughter raged across the settlement, and drum music started, with dancing. Few of the Indians spoke English, most spoke their own tribal language, or some tribal dialect comprehensible only among themselves. But they communicated. They made the blacks welcome. They plied them with small, wretched gifts. They fed them well, tried to teach tribal dances and put on exhibitions of strength, skill, or endurance to entertain their guests.

Night came on and the fires continued to smolder redly about the encampment. By dark most of the Indian males were helplessly intoxicated, either stumbling about, or, like

Billy Panther, sprawling, smiling smugly in cross-legged silence. When Billy Panther began to snore with the rage and intensity of a log-cutter, most of his younger children prostrate in sleep upon him, the party began slowly to unwind. Indian families and young couples drifted into the darkness, children were led away, and, except for sudden, unexplained bursts of laughter, silence settled over the hammock and the town.

One of Billy Panther's wives showed Obed to a hut, where the north side was boarded and patched with palmetto fronds against night chill. He was given a black bear robe as his bed and a tattered, hand-woven blanket.

Obed lay down on the robe, feeling caught between pity and admiration for these doomed people. He had never encountered such abject poverty. In even the healthiest of the braves, he could see the rib cages, the sunken belly, the caved-in cheeks, the scrawny necks. It was not that the land was poor; it was not and the Indians tried to grow their own vegetables, but they seldom were permitted to stay in one place very long. The corn stands and vegetable plots needed water and fertilizer. Not even the milk cows and their calves looked healthy. The animals, even the many dogs that wandered the settlement, reflected the panic and terror of the redsticks. They looked as if they had been running in abject fear and must be ready to run again at a moment's notice. There was no time to make a home, to eat well, to grow crops, or tend animals. They must even sleep warily, ready to flee and hide, if they were to stay alive.

It seemed to Obed that the blacks were the smarter of the two races. The Negroes had not fared well in their relations with the dominant white man, but they had adjusted to him and his ways. They learned to live with the casual cruelty, the uncaring injustice, the mistreatment, and the degradation. Some, like Miz Lucretia Borgia of Falconhurst, had even profited from the association, turning the evil into reward and strength. But these redsticks, as General Jackson and his men called them in their campaign of total annihilation, could only run and hide and wait to die.

He was aware of faint movement in the darkness, and

Elicia slipped like a shadow from the fire-illumined night into the deeper shadows of the hut. "Do you mind?" she whispered.

Obed sat up and gathered her into his arms, pulling her down to him. "Oh, Elicia. Thank God you came. I think I had a prayer answered. I wanted you."

"But you didn't ask me."

Obed sighed. "You are a young girl. Far younger than I am. Your life is before you. A new life. Right now I feel like I have no chance. Whatever I once had is gone. I have no right to spoil your chance for happiness."

She pressed against him, stroking his cheek with her soft palm. He smiled to himself because he had never felt a hand so free of calluses or lines of labor. "Oh, Obed," she whispered. "How could you ever spoil anything for me? I was never happy—not in all my life—until I saw you looking at me that day on the trail. . . ." She caught back a small gasp of hurt. "It breaks my heart that you leave us tomorrow. . . ." She exhaled heavily and sat up, peering into his eyes in the darkness. "I want as much time with you as I can have." She nestled down in his powerful arms.

Obed drew her closer to him under the ragged blanket and pressed his lips gently against her tear-dampened eyelids. "You are going into a new world. You may be free. I pray to our gods that you will be free. . . . I am hunted. Thousands of miles from my home. Without money. Without power. Without friends. Without hope. I have nothing to offer you."

"What else do I have but this? What else do we have but this?" She lay close upon him, the dying sounds of laughter and subdued voices fading in the darkness. "Just now, I don't want anything else." She laughed in a gentle way. "Just now, I don't believe in anything else."

Elicia wriggled and writhed against him for some moments until they lay comfortably side by side. His hand crept down under the threadbare coverlet to discover her nakedness. He encountered the hot, taut nipples of her full, upstanding young breasts. A powerful sensual desiring flooded through him. It was as if the gods could conspire to permit a few moments of bliss, even in hell.

She whispered meaninglessly. She wanted to give him her nakedness, her body, her self. This was all she had to offer,

and she volunteered it with all her heart and all her churning passions. She didn't know as much about this act as he did; she had been almost as carefully watched at Golden Leas Plantation as the young white women she served, but she wanted it as much as he wanted her. Her body seethed and simmered with the desires that washed hotly through her. Her lips, her breasts, her maidenhood seemed suddenly as one. To kiss her lips set her afire down there. A touch at her triangle sent tingles of elation and excitement firing through her breasts. She had never known anything like this, never fantasized so heavenly a moment. Shy, but eager, she waited tensely in his arms.

The smoothness and burn of her chaste young flesh against his palms aroused him furiously, and he restrained himself only with difficulty. He had wanted many women in his life. The hell of it was, it had seemed he had always wanted some woman, some new woman, some fiercely, some with passion, some with only the thrill of conquest. Sometimes, in his raging hungers, he had cursed himself. What was wrong with him? Why must he pant after every damned woman he saw? And why must he tire of them so quickly once he had sated himself at their insatiable wells? But he swore to himself he had never wanted any female as he desired this comely young virgin. Give me her, he prayed to his gods, and I swear to walk in your ways all the rest of my life.

"Love me, Obed," Elicia whispered. "Love me so that when you are gone on that road alone tomorrow to New Orleans, you will think only of me. You will sometimes think back to me."

"I will. I will. I always will. I can swear that to you in all honesty," he said in a taut voice. "Wherever I go . . . Before the gods, Elicia, I wish things were different. . . . But somehow I must get back to my home . . . I do not even know how I can do that, or if I can. . . . I cannot take you, because the danger is too great." She moved, her hips working involuntarily against him, and he smiled, drawing his lips across her cheeks. "But this I know. With every moment that passes, I think more of you. I think of life without you and that is as ugly as death. It is death in its way. . . . All I can think is that if I am ever safe again, I can send for you, or I

can come back for you at the fort . . . when it can be done without danger to you. That is all I can think about. I have no right to endanger you, to add to your peril, to make your life more terrible than it is."

Her teeth chattered with her nervous laughter. "Do you truly think I care about danger—as long as I am with you? I knew I was in danger of death when I ran with the rebels from Master's plantation. . . . I could have stayed and been cared for and safe. But I knew I could not. . . . It was as if something called me. . . . Maybe it was you calling me, Obed. Maybe it was you."

"It was me." He kissed her with a fierce tenderness. "Even before I knew you. It was me."

He shifted her body and pulled her closer beneath him, rigid upon her tantalizing, wetly receptive body. "I do not want to hurt you," he protested. "I am huge. You are only a young girl."

Her hand closed and moved slowly upon the colossal throbbing phallus between them. He heard her faint giggle. "An old woman once told me, a spike sinks easily where an unwanted nail is driven in pain."

"God, I hope so."

She shuddered faintly, still clinging to him. "So do I."

Obed drew her to him. She almost screamed. Instead, she sank her teeth into the soft flesh between his neck and shoulder and it was he who cried out. "Oh, do it," she whispered. "Oh, my dearest, do it. . . ."

The Negro marchers were awake and ready to head south on the last leg of their long journey when Obed came up sluggishly, still exhausted, from deepest sleep. It was like a pool of warmth which he quit reluctantly. He fought to remain a little while longer in that lost Eden, that newest lost paradise.

"They are ready to go," Elicia whispered against his ear. "We must hurry."

They dressed quickly and Elicia stole away, though all the settlement saw her go, and Obed was left to join the troop alone.

The braves, the women, the children, nodded their shy

farewells. Obed had coins left from the sale of the patroller's horse and saddle. He gave them to Billy Panther's wives. He had little; they had nothing at all.

Billy Panther gave Obed a faint smile of welcome. Panther looked sorely the worse for wear. His eyes were red-rimmed. His huge shoulders slouched round. He was surrounded by his silent wives and children. He touched them gently and stroked the tousled young heads.

Obed heard Billy Panther promising to bring back many presents, trinkets, and gifts from the Negro fort. The little girls were like little girls in any territory; they wanted dolls. All the children wanted striped candy. Billy Panther nodded at each request, promising everything. For a little while, once he was paid at the Negro fort, he would have a little money. He could make sorry little dreams come true.

Billy Panther nodded. "Perhaps old Arthbunot and his ship *Chance* will be there," he said. "I'll have real choices, for all of you, if Arthbunot is there."

His family clung to him, each for a moment, each silently, as if an unspoken prayer passed between them. By the time Billy Panther gave the order to move out, Elicia had returned to Obed's side. He grinned down at her, filled with gentleness and ardor for her, a need to protect and hold and keep her forever. He did not say any of this to her. He could not because he had nothing for her. She walked silently beside him.

The marchers came in less than an hour to an east-west wagon road. It wound out of the thick forest of the east and into the swamps and jungles to the west. It was only dimly marked, cut with ruts and pocked with gullies, but it was the main road west.

Billy Panther halted the troop and walked back to where Obed stood.

Billy Panther swung his thick, short arm toward the place where the trail disappeared into the green woods. "This is the road I told you about, my friend," Billy Panther said. "This trail goes west to New Orleans and the great river." He nodded his massive head. "You may take your horse and your handgun. I wish you well. You have served us bravely and we all wish you well."

Obed heard Elicia bite back a sob. He glanced down at her, agonized. He winced, drawing a deep breath.

After a long beat he said, "I think I will go on to Fort Blount with you, Billy Panther."

Billy Panther nodded, smiling. "A wise decision, my friend. You can always arrange with some British trader to get to New Orleans by water. It is no faster, but it is much easier."

"Yes." Obed nodded. He drew a deep breath and straightened his shoulders, filled with certainty for the first time in months. "I want to go with you."

Beside him, Elicia had not moved, but her faint smile turned up to him made the sun-blasted day even brighter for Obed.

XXVI

Fort Blount reared against the iridescent Florida sky atop Prospect Bluff. To the exhausted runaways, it seemed a castle, a fortress impregnable, invincible against their enemies. The place had been solidly erected by the British in 1814, with labor of escaped blacks, fugitive Indians, and hired labor brought in on English work boats. Its gun turrets gleamed in the sun. Built high above the east bank of the river, its parapet was fifteen feet high and eighteen feet thick. It was defended by nine pieces of heavy artillery, several of which were of large caliber. It was a refuge designed to withstand long and intense siege. Its thick walls seemed capable of resisting any cannon attack from the river winding far below. The crag upon which the fortress poised jutted out well over and above the wide stream, which made it ideal for total surveillance of the waterway, upriver and down. The entire palisade was well protected by an almost impenetrable morass at its rear. Besides this impassable swamp, the bluff was safeguarded by a large creek above it and a smaller stream below it. Its history was brief and violent, but it remained unviolated, untouched, and unmarked, a haven for blacks in the Spanish wilderness. Situated as it was, Negro Fort, as it was called above the border in the United States, commanded all navigation on the Apalachicola River and of the Flint River as well. The smoke rising from its interior and visible for miles in every direction in the serene haze rose only from cookfires and wash-pots. Strength and impregnability had given the inmates of the fort a sense of exultant security.

The fugitives approached the base of this high bluff, single

file, on a narrow, well-worn path slashed through a tangled wilderness of elder, bay, and willow interwoven with wild grapevines. For some hours they had passed huts, shacks, and well-tended, well-built homes, with graze and farmlands and indigo fields, all managed and worked by Negroes. These people stopped and stood silently, watching them pass. They saw thousands of slash pines cut and dripping the valuable turpentines.

"These are black-owned farms and plantations for fifty miles along this great river," Billy Panther told them with pride. "All under the protection of the black army at Negro Fort."

Some of the blacks wept openly at their first sight of this bastion of undreamed-of safety vaulted against the serene blue sky. Tears blurred the gazes of most of them. Some sank to their knees in thanksgiving.

"We are delivered. God knows, we are delivered."

"Looks like we've crossed the Jordan."

"Amen and amen."

Obed stared up at the quiet fortress, shocked. If this place were so secure against attack and assault, why were not blacks from the slave states rushing down here to it? The word of this Eden must get back across the Spanish border. The abolitionists promised milk and honey and life without labor above the Mason-Dixon. Didn't the same kind of promises go out from this fortress? He couldn't deny a sense of pride that his downtrodden and repressed people were able to maintain such a sanctuary, even with the support of the British, the impotent Spanish government, and friendly Indian tribes of the territory. It looked like a wealthy farming community. The river was wide and deep and navigable for great ships. Traders sailed up the waterway from Port St. Joe and Apalachicola Bay. They came in from England, from Canada, from the Caribbean, and from some United States shipowners who violated government restrictions on trade with the blacks. An embargo had been thrown up against Negro Fort, but to date was ineffective and futile.

These people were recognized only as "fugitive slaves" by the government in Washington, D.C., as chattel of their stateside owners, as lawbreakers and felons and nothing

else. "We'll have peace down there when those niggers say uncle," Andrew Jackson had said. Rewards were posted for return of certain blacks in astonishing figures and Billy Panther admitted that some Indians, despite Jackson's campaigns of annihilation, remained friendly and subservient to the worthy from Tennessee and collected bounties on blacks when they could. "They act in terror of Jackson's wrath," Billy Panther said. "Not in friendship or mutual trust. Jackson does not respect the greatest redstick, not even at the moment he praises him most."

The band of black refugees, led by Billy Panther, started up the precipitous slope of Prospect Bluff. As they advanced, the vegetation itself altered, becoming twisted and gnarled as the brush and trees adapted to the rocky slopes, the sheer walls of stone. Grotesque tree trunks writhed back upon themselves in weird convolutions. Ropes of vines hung in pendulous festoons between the misshapen boles. Sunlight, filtered in crosshatched patches through the shaggy leaves, took on a heavy green tint that glittered on the dead leaves and thick mold of the rocks and great, tormented trunks. The marchers were forced to stop often and rest. It required three men to push the cart ahead of them uphill. Gravity itself seemed to exert some terrible pull, dragging them down. They fought their way up, clinging to vines and stunted trees. Vegetation thinned out near the crest of the bluff.

Obed caught the sound of running feet from above them. He moved to call out a warning to Billy Panther when the guide halted, standing at a strange tilted angle on the perpendicular heights, and raised his hand for silence and dead-stop.

They were surrounded by armed blacks in what Obed supposed was serviceable and inexpensive lightweight military uniform. These soldiers wore slouch tan hats, short-sleeve khaki shirts, and cotton pants, dyed brown. Some wore boots. Most were barefoot. They sweated in the heat despite the warm-weather gear. The guns they carried were the Kentucky long rifles used by the United States soldiers in their raids. Obed reckoned this firepower had been wrested from enemies, stolen from hijacked convoys, or bought in a contraband market from American traitors willing to turn a dishonest buck. He didn't care as long as these people could arm

themselves against their formidable, unyielding foes from the north. He had seen enough southern white Americans to mistrust them all, to a man.

He was most impressed—stunned—by his first glimpse of the stores of arms and ammunition with which the British army had supplied the fort when the British garrison was withdrawn at the close of the War of 1812. Two huge magazines were plentifully supplied with gunpowder and grape shot. The British allies had left behind three thousand stands of arms, gear which was constantly implemented by black sorties against raiding U.S. army troops sent in on one pretext or another. If there were no border incidents providing excuse for incursion against the redsticks, the U.S. government invented them or staged them, Billy Panther said. Spanish Florida hung like a plum before the "manifest-destiny" Americans and they used any excuse to invade and conquer.

These latest emigrés were welcomed by blacks, fed, offered water for drinking and bathing, made comfortable inside the walled garrison.

"This is it." Billy Panther's voice was exultant. He was filled with pride. He had safely convoyed another flight of fugitives through American lines to this black refuge. He swung his arm, indicating the shops, the stores, the goods piled high, imported and stacked for export.

Obed whistled between his teeth. This was a wealthy domain, far surpassing the resources of his own kingdom in Senegal.

Billy Panther stood proudly beside Obed, his thick chest swelled in his colorful shift. For some reason he seemed most eager to have earned the respect and admiration of the giant Mandingan. Obed had become a personage in the Indian's eyes, a figure of esteem though he knew little more about him than he had known when their paths crossed first. It appeared important to Billy Panther that Obed understand the importance and magnitude of the feat the Indian had accomplished. Obed smiled and nodded. Whatever it was the Indian had planned or dreamed, he had accomplished it. This indeed was haven for the long-suffering slaves.

Obed looked about the bustling, high-piled fortress, the acres inside and outside the thick, high walls, the incredible

view of the countryside—and the waterways—in all directions. Farmlands, bathed in a serene aqua glow beyond a stand of purpled pines, the ribbon of water winding through a verdant forest. The distant streams, glistening with sunlight, far below. The grass in the open valleys down there was rich and lush. Small rills wandered peacefully through acreage where horses, sheep, and cattle grazed or half-wild hogs rooted for buried acorns and hickory nuts. Fields of indigo flourished. Buds of new cotton glowed in long, wavering rows. Over all this a sheen spread, blue-tinted, undisturbed, in a kind of languor, a warmth and silence too fragile and too wonderful to desecrate.

"Yes, Billy Panther, this is it," Obed agreed. "You have brought us all to a promised land, it seems."

"It seems?" Billy Panther gazed up at him, puzzled. "What do you find wrong in this place?"

"Nothing." Obed spread his hands. "It seems too good to be true, that's all."

Garcia, the king of this infant Negro territory, was the greatest shock of all to Obed when finally he was summoned into the presence of the anointed liege. Obed had no preconceived notions of what Garcia would be, only the hope for the best. He had heard only that the British had left Garcia in command of the fort and the region along the river when their garrison withdrew. Garcia had consolidated the monarchy. He conducted trade with shippers, buyers, and adventurers. He had established a wealthy, secure domain up here, despised by the Americans, tolerated by the indigent and impotent Spanish government, accepted by most of the neighboring Indian tribes. What could be wrong with such a man?

Sickly, Obed felt he instinctively sensed that wrong at first sight of King Garcia. Initial impressions are almost always erroneous and dangerous, and Obed warned himself he had to be fair in his judgments. His own immediate future and Elicia's welfare depended on the largess and friendship of this potentate.

Garcia welcomed them into his large and airy quarters. Seated blacks waved palm fronds to stir the air in the noble presence.

Obed smiled mildly, finding a faint irony in this menial labor of grown men. Whoever these Negroes were, they had not appreciably bettered their status in life, it seemed to him. They had been slaves fanning flies from the august persons of their masters and mistresses above the border; they were still slaves in demeaning positions here. But again, he warned himself against prejudice. He had his own flunkeys back in Senegal. He treated his own lowly laborers with as little respect as Garcia accorded these people.

He winced. In fact, as much as he despised the idea, he saw himself at his most vain and arrogant in Garcia. The two of them had much in common. He supposed most powerful men did.

Garcia was a big man compared to others of the fort or the courtiers fawning around him. He towered above them, insolent, his regal head always tilted as if to put slight distance between himself and his petitioners. Don't fault him, Obed warned himself. I've seen you stand precisely like that.

Garcia wore a silk shift-shirt, expensive linen pants and an embroidered robe. Again, Obed warned himself this was no reason to disparage the black monarch at first glimpse. Obed himself had been the fanciest-togged noble in all of Senegal. Only a strong-willed man could resist the trappings of nobility.

Billy Panther walked with Obed to the deeply cushioned and pillowed chair where Garcia awaited them. The Indian stood beside Obed almost as if he sponsored him.

Obed sensed the static aura of mistrust and jaundice crackling suddenly in the atmosphere between himself and Garcia. It was almost tangible; it was not imagination, or a sense of persecution. Garcia had taken instant hatred for him, the same distaste Obed felt for Garcia.

God in heaven, he warned himself, I came running here seeking refuge and assistance. It is not for me to disdain this man, to fault him in any way. Of all human beings, at this moment, I need his friendship most.

Garcia spent some silent moments looking him over which, despite his inner vows of patience and humility, Obed found difficult to bear. Obed forced himself to keep a warm smile

about his mouth and eyes though he seethed with rage deep in his belly, even when he could not reasonably explain it in his own mind. There can be but one king, he reminded himself. Here, it is Garcia.

"I have spoken with most of the other refugees," Garcia said finally, nodding and smiling emptily, his gaze fixed on a spot in the middle of Obed's forehead. "They are mostly field hands. You are not a field hand. Who are you?"

"I am an African, your majesty," Obed said, bowing his head slightly, a movement which still kept him over a foot taller than the king. "I was brought in fraud to this country as a freed man."

Garcia's mouth twisted in a lemony way. "We all were. Oh, we all were."

Obed nodded. "But I was not brought midships in chains, sir. No man owns me. I am trying to get home."

"To Africa?" Garcia glanced about at his courtiers, smiling faintly.

"Yes, sir."

"Why are you here?"

"He joined with me and my party. In Alabama territory," Billy Panther said. "In an action against Americans, he acted with bravery and cunning. I believe he will be a welcomed fighter for you."

Garcia glanced at Billy Panther and shrugged.

"We'll see about that in good time," Garcia said. "We'll see." He let his gaze trail downward across Obed's muscular body which, though much thinner than when he arrived in New Orleans, was formidable, with tendons that looked like steel cables. At last Garcia spoke again, staring at Obed but not meeting his eyes. "Do you have money?"

"What?"

"How much money do you have?" Garcia said. He shook his head with mild impatience. His question seemed clear enough, requiring no further elucidation.

"None." Obed spread his hands. "I have no money."

Garcia glanced around impatiently; a busy man, he hated wasting time. "No belongings? No worldly goods? How do you expect to buy anything here? How do you expect to live? This is a fortress, not an almshouse."

"I ask no charity."

"It seems to me, unless you are provided charity, you will soon starve. We have no place for the needy. We work here. We are fighting for our lives."

"I understand that. I hoped to work for anything I received."

Garcia shrugged again. "We all work. But that is not the point here. You miss my point. We work, but we pay too. What we have. All we have. If it is gold or goods, it must go into the nation's coffers. It is the only way we can survive."

"I am not asking you to give me anything."

"Someone will have to support you."

"I am willing, anxious to pay my fair share. It is just that I have been robbed. I am at this moment without funds. That doesn't mean at all that I expect to become a burden on you or your nation."

"Don't worry." Garcia laughed faintly as if he were almost enjoying himself at the big man's expense. "I won't permit that."

"If you will let me work, I will prove my value."

"Well, that's what I'm trying to tell you. There may be no place for you here."

Obed bit back the rage gorging up in him. He forced himself to remain calm. He was aware that beside him, Billy Panther had caught his own breath, puzzled and disturbed. "What kind of refuge is this, sir? Is it only for those who can *buy* their freedom?"

Garcia shrugged. "Freedom is not cheap."

"Surely not all slaves arriving here have worldly goods to give you?"

'That doesn't concern us. We find places for most who come here. But there must be a place for them. In the good of the state. That is all we can think about. I am trying to tell you. You may not be the sort of man we want here."

"If I had money or goods to give, you might find a place for me?"

"I don't think we need to continue this. My position is clear enough. There is no place here for you. We will

expect you to leave as soon as possible. That is all I have to say."

Obed stared at the king of Negro Fort. In Garcia he saw not only himself but every bloated politician around the world, a man drunk with power, with absolute power. God knew he had quaffed deeply of that fountain himself. Like Garcia, he had stood adamant, final arbiter, with no chance for appeal, no show of compassion. God in heaven. It had even pleased his vanity that there was nowhere for his victim to turn. He was the last resort. On his word hung life or death, acceptance or banishment.

His shoulders slumped round. Abruptly, he was exhausted, overcome with fatigue. In that moment he felt desolated, deserted by man and by his gods who had always favored him above all others. Alone. It was as if what had gone over his own shoulder now came back to haunt him. The same haughty arrogance, the same deadly insolence, the exact lack of compassion. He had been rushing headlong toward this situation, this despair, all the arrogant days of his life.

He was so tired, so beaten, he wanted to beg. He wanted to fall on his knees and plead for compassion. He knew better. He could debase himself but he could not improve his lot, not here at Negro Fort. There was nothing he could say, no words that would convert the monarch or arouse a gram of compassion in him. Garcia no longer had compassion; he had no time for it. He was the ruler of fifty miles along a dark river, entirely surrounded by hostiles. There was no room for such character weakness.

Obed forced himself to bow his head in submission and sign of departure. Garcia shrugged and turned his attention elsewhere. It was like praying to God in hopeless darkness and finding that God didn't even hear, or if he heard, he did not care. He was too bloated on his own self-importance to care. It fed his vanity to be the court of last resort and to turn a deaf ear.

Obed turned and walked out of the large room. Billy Panther hesitated, speaking urgently with Garcia, then he followed, striding on his short thick legs across the hard-packed flooring.

Obed stood forlornly in the sun when Billy Panther came out of the king's courtroom to join him. Obed looked about helplessly. He dreaded to see Elicia. What could he say to her? What could he tell her? Of all the refugees, he was the one unwelcomed and unwanted.

His eyes burned. He wanted to laugh at the irony. If this place were a black paradise, he was being turned away at its gates.

"I am sorry, my friend," Billy Panther said.

Obed shrugged. "Without bribes or tributes, I am without hope here."

Billy Panther glanced over his thick shoulder and exhaled. He shook his massive head. "I don't know if it would help even to pay him. Garcia didn't like you. He didn't want you here. One could see that. One could feel it, even before you spoke. . . . I tried to tell Garcia what a value you would be in his army. He would not even listen."

"How could he hate me so violently on sight?" Obed said, at that same instant admitting he had felt the same violent hatred for Garcia, unexplained,unexplainable.

Billy Panther spread his hands. "It is easy to see."

"I am glad it is easy for you."

"It is easy. I have hated men on sight. I am sure that you have."

"But he will not even have me here."

"It is that you are a threat to him."

"What? A threat?"

Billy Panther nodded. "King Garcia knows that you are no ordinary man. I knew this the day I saw you, but there was no threat in what you were. But Garcia has a kingdom of ordinary black men. And he can rule them. In any way he likes. He is greedy. He is powerful. He wants more power, and not less. You might threaten his power. You might make it harder for him to rule these people. That is why he does not want you here, my friend. It is that simple. You are too strong. You are too big. If you ate well and you rested, you would be far too healthy and smart. It is that simple."

Obed laughed helplessly. "And so I can go back up to the east-west road and head for New Orleans without a biscuit in my pocket."

"You still have your horse. And saddle and gun."

"So I have. Unless they are already confiscated."

'You could exchange them for something. Perhaps enough to help you get to New Orleans."

"I guess that is about the only hope I have."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps I have a better plan. You are in great luck. We have arrived at Fort Blount at just the right time. I hear that Arthbunot's ship *Chance* is anchored below in the river. Before you give up, let's talk to Arthbunot. He may have answers for you."

XXVII

Alexander Arthbunot slouched like a Scottish buddha in a canvas swing chair on the bridge of his schooner *Chance*.

Obed peered down at the obese man with intense interest. Arthbunot was slumped like lard melting over both arms of his canvas chair, an enormous-bellied man short of breath, with decaying red hair, splotched scalp, and a thick red beard, carefully and lovingly trimmed. His burring voice came straight off the high crags and wild moors of his native heather-flushed Scotland. His shirtwaist was sweated and sour. Moisture glistened on his thick red neck and in the graying hairs of his chest. A battered officer's cap, looking like a greasy dead cat, was tossed upon a map table beside his swollen elbow.

By now Obed had learned that the aging Scot was called a desperate adventurer by the Americans, a cutthroat traitor by his mortal enemy Andrew Jackson, a freebooter, a trader in anything that would turn a profit. But he was best known, most loved, and most hated as a friend and protector of runaway Indians in Spanish Florida. There were those who wouldn't trust his oath, others willing to place their lives in his stout, stubby-fingered hands. Billy Panther was one of those.

Panther had led Obed aboard the schooner as though the Mandingan's salvation lay aboard the *Chance* and with its mysterious skipper. Obed had no such faith in anything, or hope, left after his scene with Garcia at Negro Fort.

The *Chance* was not a big craft, but it was seaworthy and expertly built in Scotland to withstand rough seas. It was not

more than sixty feet in length. There was the smell of salt water about it, the sharp stink of tar and paint, the overheated smells of food simmering in the open galley.

Arthbunot greeted Billy Panther warmly, and the Indian introduced Obed as his friend. "A big 'un, eh?" the captain shouted. Either he was deaf and shouted to compensate, or he was accustomed to having his voice blown to bits on the high seas.

After studying Obed narrowly for some seconds with admiration and puzzlement, the captain invited them to sit down. He offered them a cool drink of peach brandy and a "chaw of real Virginia cake." Billy Panther accepted both eagerly, but Obed declined; he had never developed a taste for chewing tobacco. He watched the other two men, with cheeks distended, talking and chewing and spitting. "You don't want to get downwind from me," Arthbunot shouted. "Never."

Each seemed waiting for the others to set any agenda for this meeting. At last Arthbunot said, "You've not sought me out to exchange pleasantries, Billy Panther. Out with it. What is it you want of me?"

"We cannot come and chew cake with you?" Billy Panther inquired.

"Hardly." Arthbunot shook his head. "Not in these times. Times are troublesome, Panther. Either I am getting very old, or things are very bad. You know that Andrew Jackson has sent General Gaines to build a new United States fort at the junction of the Flint, the Chattahoochee, and the Apalachicola rivers. They're there to store supplies from New Orleans. And you know how the Americans must get supplies up there?"

"Up the Apalachicola River from the gulf," Billy Panther said in a tired and unenchanted voice.

"Very good, my boy. And to the head of the class. And why up this river, past Negro Fort? Because Jackson and Gaines and Clinch and the others are praying the Negro fort will fire on American ships—the only new excuse the Old Murderer needs to invade Spanish Florida again."

"The Americans have no right to these waters," Obed ventured.

"Right you are. They've no more right to march into

Spanish Florida than I have to invade Washington, D.C., and burn the White House like the British did last time. Old Hickory knows all that. But he doesn't give a damn. They say he can't get the President's approval for incursions into Florida, so he is marching an army of Tennessee volunteers to the border in Georgia, at his own expense. He believes the government will give him the authority to invade. If it does not, he will find some pretext, a staged Indian 'atrocity' in some Georgia hamlet. He says he has come in peace, but he is itching for battle. He calls it peace to give his crimes a more palatable name."

"You hate this man," Obed said.

"*Hate* is too mild a word. He is a fanatic who parades his fanaticism as patriotism. He is opposed by all the eastern and northern states, but he is a hero along the frontier, where the men are as wild and bloodthirsty as he is. I met with him. In New Orleans. It was after he had captured that territory—after the war was already over, by the way. I told him that all the land he had captured had been nullified by the Treaty of Ghent, which said all conquered lands must be restored. You should have seen him. No insane man ever looked more terrorizing. Wild-eyed. Choking with rage."

Abruptly the captain's mood altered. "But enough about my old friend Jackson, who would be in an insane asylum if he were less rich and strong than he is. What is it that Captain Arthbunot can do for you gentlemen?"

"I wish to get to New Orleans," Obed said.

"That's easy enough. You may book passage with me aboard the *Chance*. All I ask is that you have the price of the passage."

"I am afraid I would have to work to pay my passage," Obed said.

"You kilt somebody? You on the run?'

Obed sighed. "I am wanted in the United States."

"A runaway, are you? A prize stud you must be. Did you kill your master and run?"

"No. I have no master. I must get back home to Africa. New Orleans is only the first leg of my journey. . . . When I am there, I shall have to find some ship that will take me to Dakar."

"Some ship that will take you to Dakar." Arthbunot shook his head. "You are a great innocent, all right. You make it sound so simple."

"I have no money, but I am willing to work my passage."

"Oh, you'd find plenty of skippers to hire you. Some will even vow they are bound for Dakar. Some might even be. But what are your chances of ever getting to Dakar aboard one of the ships sailing from New Orleans? A great black prize specimen like you? Let me tell you, my boy. There is no chance at all you'd ever make it. None. You'd be shanghaied, sent to one of the Caribbean countries to work those sugar plantations, or you'd be sold north to one of the southern planters. There are no white men who are going to allow you to go peacefully to Dakar. Or anywhere else. You're far too valuable for that."

"Do I not have the right to go where I will?"

"The right?" Arthbunot laughed. "Right has nothing to do with it. No more than right is involved in Jackson's overrunning the Indian nations below the Spanish border. No more at all. Money. That's all that has anything to do with it. Except that since you are a Negro, you could not even *buy* passage east to Dakar. They would take your money, but you would never reach your destination. You are a valuable animal in the eyes of slave traders. Greed would drive any one of them wild at the sight of you. They would kill to own you, but they will never permit you to escape their bondage."

Obed stood up and paced the narrow cabin. He stared out at the river, at the deck of the schooner, at the empty heavens. "Are you saying there is no way that I could find a safe passage home from New Orleans?"

"I would stake my life on it."

Obed felt as if he might vomit. Bile gorged up into his throat. He stared around him helplessly. He trusted this aging seaman. Arthbunot was not lying to him. He might not even be painting the picture as dark and hopeless as it truly was.

"What are you telling me, sir? Is there no place I would be safe?"

Arthbunot shrugged. "Perhaps at Negro Fort. As long as the fort itself stands, you might be safe there."

"He has been turned away by Garcia," Panther said.

Arthbunot laughed immoderately. He was not in the least astonished at this information. He said, "Garcia fears you, eh? You are a threat to him."

"How do you know this?"

"How do I know anything, my boy? From a long and misspent life. From having to read a man and read him well, even before he speaks. I have traded with the Indians, supplied them food, trinkets, guns, and information, right under the outraged noses of the United States government. I have to know in advance who I can trust and how far. You can trust a lot of people a long ways, my boy, until too much money is involved, and then all of a sudden you could trust a sidewinder more safely."

"Are you saying I may as well give myself up to the white men above the border?" Obed asked in agony.

"I would never give such advice, my boy. There are one or two slim chances that you might find a skipper willing to disembark you safely in Dakar. But such a man would be hard to find. And you, alone and wanted, in New Orleans. You would have no chance at all."

Obed slumped into the chair which was too small for him and sagged, bracing his elbows upon his knees. In sick dejection he stared at the gleaming scrubbed deck.

"I might be able to help you," Arthbunot said. "But don't get your pecker up about it. I say only that I might. When I sail to New Orleans for supplies soon, I can make discreet inquiries. If I find a skipper I can trust, perhaps I can get you to him. I know that's not much hope, but this is no time of hope. It is the best I can promise you. I would promise you no more, because doing this is probably more than I can accomplish. I can only try."

"That is most kind," Obed said.

Arthbunot laughed. "Yes, it is. Most kind. I tell you, a fine young man like you. I hate to see you forced into slavery, no matter the color of your skin." He laughed. "As far as God and I are concerned, skin has no color."

Billy Panther said, "Perhaps he can stay in Panther Town with me until you return, Captain."

Arthbunot shook his head. "No. There would be too much talk. That talk would ride across the border into Georgia or

Alabama on the first stiff breeze, and here would come the bounty hunters. No, he wouldn't be safe there. He would be safest at Negro Fort."

"But he can't stay there. He has already been forbidden."

Arthbunot waved his arm. "Billy Panther, I am disappointed in you. A man who sits in Indian counsels with Bowlegs and Wildcat. Don't you know that bribes can accomplish anything, especially with Garcia? . . . And we must not damn him for his greed, either. It is a kind of self-protection. He knows it is only time until Jackson finds the pretext he needs to invade the Negro kingdom. Then it will all be over. Garcia is only feathering his own nest. Putting away annuity for that day when he must, with all of us, run for his life."

"I have nothing," Obed said.

"A horse. A saddle. A gun," Billy Panther reminded him.

"It is not much," Captain Arthbunot allowed. "But it might be enough. When I see Garcia, I will speak a word for you. I will promise him you need haven only for a little while, not time enough to pose a threat to his power. Your horse might buy you something. I don't know. I can tell you this, my boy. I wish to God it were more."

Obed thanked the Scot, feeling more helpless and abandoned than ever.

Arthbunot reached out and touched Obed's muscled arm in a compassionate gesture. "You ain't the only one, lad, with more in his heart than his tongue can say, eh? Eh?"

Obed and Panther returned silently ashore. Here they parted, and Obed climbed the hard-warn path to the forbidden fort.

He found the fort bustling with life in the late afternoon. Buyers from boats below were carting off cotton and naval stores by the wagonload. Obed sighed. Given even a chance, this fort could be the center of a rich and thriving territory. It did not matter the place had been denied to him. He sought Elicia in the crowds of emigrés. More fugitives had arrived; there seemed to be an unending stream of terrified humanity seeking refuge.

"Obed."

Elicia's voice stopped him. She sat in a shadowed alcove not far from the main gate. Her shawl was fixed about her

head and she appeared to keep her face averted, even as she sought him in the crowds.

He went to her and took her into his arms. She was rigid, frightened, and she withdrew from his arms at once, stepping back into the shadows.

"They told me," she whispered.

"Told you what?"

"You have been sent away from the fort. Garcia will not allow you to stay here."

"Will you come with me?"

"I would go anywhere with you," she said. "You are my life. But I cannot leave the fort."

"What do you mean, you can't leave this fort? You can walk out with me. I don't know where we will go, what we will do, but if you want to face it, you can come with me."

"No." She shook her head. "Today I was called, with the other women of our party, before King Garcia. We have all been told to stay." She lowered her gaze and bit her lip. There was more, but she couldn't bring herself to say it.

"And? What?" he prompted her. He took her slender arms in his hands. "There is nothing you can't say to me."

"I don't want to hurt you."

His heart sank. "What is it?"

"King Garcia. He has chosen me. As one of his women . . . to live in his apartment."

Obed stood immobile. Sometimes there were no words.

She wept softly. "I stole away as soon as I could. I waited for you. I could not find you."

"What are you going to do?"

"Oh, Obed. What can I do?"

"I can take you with me. But I have nothing to offer you."

"It is much worse than that." Elicia dug her nails into Obed's arms. "You told me that you are sought in the States. If we ran away, Garcia would send men to hunt us down. One of the women in his harem told me. His word is law here. The woman said this is true. There is no law in Negro Fort except the word of Garcia."

"I can't leave you here with him. I won't."

"Where would we go? You are wanted in the States. You would be hunted by Garcia's men. Where could we go?"

"We could join the Indians. Many blacks are doing that."

"Could we—live like that?"

Obed winced. "I could. You couldn't. You're right. There is nothing I can do. Nowhere I could take you. At least you would be safe here at Negro Fort. Protected. By Garcia himself."

"I can't live without you, Obed." Her voice sank, sounding hollow. "I won't live without you."

Obed went directly to Garcia's courtrooms. He asked to see the king and was told he would have to leave his name. "Garcia will decide. He will send word if he will talk with you."

"But I have nowhere to stay. He has refused to allow me to stay here at the fort."

The black man shrugged. "Then it is not likely that he will even see you. At best, it would be a matter of two or three days." He spread his hands and smiled blandly. "And as you say, you have no place to wait."

Obed drew a deep breath. He had no right to gamble with Elicia's safety and yet she had declared heartbrokenly that she would kill herself rather than live among the women of Garcia's harem. There was nowhere in Spanish Florida he could take her where she would be safe, fed, housed. She would have every luxury possible to blacks here. She would have nothing with him except peril and flight.

Still, he was down to his last card. He had no more chips to play. He stared at the black bureaucrat. "Tell Garcia. Tell him it is about the girl who came in Panther's party this morning. Her name is Elicia."

"Ah, yes, the sixteen-year-old."

"She is mine."

"Yours? What kind of claim do you have?"

"I have this claim. Tell him Elicia is mine. Garcia cannot have her."

Garcia peered out at Obed, standing with Elicia, trembling at his side, in the glinting green-tinted sunlight of late afternoon. It had been a long and fatiguing day. Garcia would not even have seen this exiled Mandingan, but his jaded appetites

needed the arousal of conflict. The outcome was not in question, but sparks might fly anyhow.

"Why are you here, Obed? Who sent for you? Who allowed you to stay in the confines of this fort? I warned you early today to leave—or to forfeit your life."

"I am willing to leave, sir."

"You're not in a hurry, though? Do you think I speak idly? Do you think I make empty threats? Do you think that when I refuse you the right to this place, I will not enforce my law?"

"I have not come to ask for clemency, sir."

"I know. I wouldn't even have bothered to see you if you had. But you are stirring up trouble. I told you there was no place for you here. The reason I did not want you was that I saw the troublemaker in you. Now you have turned this young girl against me."

"That is not the truth of it, sir." Obed's voice shook. He saw himself in Garcia's place and some poor devil petitioner begging fruitlessly for mercy, even simple justice. Christ in heaven, is that what he had been? Another Garcia. All powerful. All corrupt. Corrupted by total power, uncaring, unmoved, unmovable.

Garcia's brow tilted. "Not the truth, eh? Are you saying that I have been misinformed? Did not this girl come into this fort with Panther's party? Did I not pay him for having guided her here?"

"All that is true, sir."

"Of course it's true. As it is true that the girl is mine. She is to stay here. With me. I have looked at her. I have decided. I want her. Here. With me. Among my women."

"No." The word was a tearful, pleading whisper from Elicia.

"You have heard from her, sir," Obed said. "She wishes to stay with me."

"That is because she is a young girl. She doesn't know what is best for her. You have turned her head. You are already making trouble for me. Suppose I let her go with you, where would you take her?" Garcia laughed in a chilled way. "Where will you go, even without her?"

"I do not know, sir . . . I will find someplace."

"Will you? One of the black farms in my kingdom. Do you

think one of them would take you in defiance of my law? None will take you in. Will you go and live among the Indians? You might do that. The girl could not. She would soon be dead. The life is miserable. They are unable to stay anywhere very long. If they do, the bounty hunters come and round up the blacks to return them to the States. Or, if they hide in the swamp, they are soon dead of disease."

"I will find something." Obed spoke defiantly, but his voice was weak. Garcia had not exaggerated the horror of life among the fugitive Indians not permitted to settle anywhere for more than even a few weeks at a time, half-starved, diseased. How could he take Elicia among them?

"You will find nothing. Because there is nothing. Panther says you wish to go to New Orleans. I advise you to go there. Leave at once. The trip across land is too rugged. This girl could not make it. Leave her here with me and go."

"Please, sir. When you denied me the right to stay in the fort today, I went out with Panther to Arthbunot's boat. I talked with him. If I could be permitted to stay—not in the fort, I would not ask for that, but in a farmhouse, a vacant one, anything until Arthbunot returns. He will take me to New Orleans with him. I will pose no threat to you. I swear."

"Arthbunot, eh? And why did old Alexander think I might permit you to stay in my kingdom?"

"Because it would be inhuman to turn me away. Like you, I am black. Without the help of someone like Arthbunot, I have nowhere to go. He has promised to help."

"And you plan to leave when Arthbunot returns?"

"I would not stay one day longer, sir."

"Yet you have no goods, nothing to offer me for rent of one of these houses?"

Obed hesitated. "I have a horse, sir. It is a stallion. No more than two or three years old. A saddle horse. Strong and young."

"And yet you didn't tell me about this animal when you spoke to me before. You led me to believe you had nothing."

Obed spoke swiftly, in panic. "I was not sure I still owned the animal, sir. I was not part of Panther's party. I joined them on the trail. He was not paid by your council for

bringing me here. I thought he might take my horse as payment. He had every right.''

''Every right.''

''It is only today, while we visited Arthbunot, that Panther told me he was allowing me to keep the horse.''

Garcia's mouth twisted. He was enjoying this encounter even more than he'd anticipated. ''I see . . . I may be inclined then to take the horse and permit you a farmhouse. But I will not concede anything else. I do not want you inside this fort . . . If you are caught inside the fort, you will be driven from your farm. Is that acceptable?''

Obed nodded and drew a deep breath. ''Yes, sir. We will go at once if you will have someone show us the shack you so generously permit to us.''

''Us?'' Now Garcia laughed aloud, truly delighted. ''If you mean Elicia. No. She stays here with me.''

''I have a saddle for the horse. Fine leather, saddlebags.''

''I'll take that along with the horse. You have no need for a saddle if you have no animal to ride, eh?''

''And a gun.''

''Ah, ha. You suddenly sound quite well off. Better fixed than most of the poor devils who come here. Yes. I'll take the gun too.''

''Then let Elicia go with me.''

Garcia spoke sharply, his tone deadly. ''I have told you, nigger. I will keep the woman.''

Obed drew a deep breath, finding one last trump card with which to gamble, from his own misspent past. He had sat where Garcia now found himself, in total control. But even in that rarefied atmosphere there had been things he could not do, acts which roused opinion against him, ugly marks which might eventually destroy him.

''You will have to kill me then, sir, to keep Elicia.'

This was his ultimate gamble. His life was on the line. He heard Elicia's sharp gasp of shock and protest. He did not glance toward her. He kept his gaze fixed on Garcia. The king was, unsurprisingly, not very moved by his defiance.

Garcia merely smiled. ''This can be arranged easily.''

''I am sure it can, sir. I am not fool enough to think anybody here at Negro Fort cares whether I live or die. But, I

have spent a little time sitting in a chair much like the one you occupy, King Garcia. I have learned one truth. There are some things which even an absolute despot cannot do—not safely."

"Oh?" Garcia did not even bother to doubt Obed's claim to a former place of power. One looked at Obed and *knew*. Garcia was more interested in the veiled threat.

"If you take my horse, my saddle, my gun, my right to come and go here in this fort, and kill me to take my woman, there will be many who will turn against you. Maybe not even enough of them to matter this time. But you will make enemies. Enemies you may not be able to afford later on . . . in some more important matter.'

Garcia chewed this truth over for some moments. It grew quieter in the room, darker. His council shifted, uncomfortable in their seats.

At last Garcia bowed to ethnic wisdom, expressed by the fugitive and digested by the monarch. A sixteen-year-old beauty like this was worth almost any sacrifice, but there were some sacrifices that perhaps even he could ill afford. Obed had touched him to the quick. Garcia admitted he had made many enemies in his months of power. This incident might earn him more, even among those weak-pissing nice nellies on his council who did not believe a woman was worth a horse, a saddle, and a gun.

"Damn you," Garcia said. "I knew from the first instant that I did not want you here. And I was right. You are dangerous to me. Too dangerous. A threat all the time because people would follow you. They would admire you. Trust you. Follow you. I can either kill you, or allow you to live on the fringe of this kingdom. I am a reasonable man." He waved his arm. "Get out of this fort. Stay out of it. Take the woman with you and go. . . . And may you rot in hell."

Obed bowed low, smiling in submission. "I look forward to seeing you there, your majesty."

XXVIII

The next few months, with the arousal and inspiration of Elicia's young and ardent love, were the pleasantest in all Obed's memory. Perhaps because their love was so deep and honest, and because it was bittersweet, with doom hanging over it from the first breath. They were caught in the eye of the hurricane of the death struggle between the surviving Indian tribes and the white man from north of the Spanish border. Obed knew they existed in a fool's paradise—only the most retarded and least informed ex-slave truly believed there was anything permanent or lasting or secure in Garcia's black kingdom. All knew better; they simply lived on their powder keg as best they could. And Obed sweated every day, awaiting word from Alexander Arthbunot, days that stretched into weeks and then months of silence. He and Elicia had only a scabrous roof over their heads, their bare hands as tools to work the land, trap food, or plant crops. Plainly, he and Elicia were cast into the depths of a hell and still they found contentment and pleasure there, because they were together. Together and in love.

Sometimes, laughing with Elicia, he felt he was still as young as she, as full of hope and dreams, as blind to despair. He was almost content to drift with her from day to day in this serene new existence in the Spanish forest. It was as if they were hidden there, concealed and secure in their own Eden, even when he knew better. Still he was driven by a desire entirely new to him. His greatest aim at the moment was to keep Elicia protected and decently fed and content. He wanted this desperately, even as he realized that he could not

keep Elicia insulated here forever at his side. Everything conspired against them. This warm, impoverished little paradise was all they would ever have. He had to make it perfect—and make it last for her as long as he could.

They had this moment! He had to keep reminding himself of this and to make the most of it. This day, this hour, was all they had that no one could ever take from them and what they made of it depended on themselves. He had to put everything else aside, fear of the future, need to escape, hope for reestablishing his old life. He had to behave as if this were permanent even when he knew it was all in vain. It would be destroyed, and they along with it. It terrified him to think how absolutely he and Elicia—and all the escaped blacks along the Apalachicola—depended upon King Garcia's power and protection. Garcia alone stood between them and the invading white armies and bounty hunters. Everyone was aware by now that General Jackson's four-thousand-man army poised on the Georgia border. This bloodthirsty man might strike—tomorrow—the next hour. God alone knew.

Obed and Elicia had come upriver to this abandoned shack the day following his confrontation with King Garcia. Miraculously, Obed had prevailed in that exchange. He had made a powerful enemy of the absolute monarch, but he had prevailed. He had bought an unseen hut, a piece of cleared land, and Elicia's freedom with a horse, a saddle, and a gun. Garcia had even allowed him to sleep one night within the confines of the fort, though he'd had to sleep on a bare cot in the fortress jail. Obed accepted with a show of gratitude. He had won all the concessions from Garcia that he would obtain on this earth; he would make the best of them.

Lying in that tight-walled cell, it occurred to Obed with some force that Garcia had him where he wanted him. Despite his promises, Garcia could leave him in this dungeon, let him rot there. Who would even know or care, except the helpless Elicia? Still, he had no choice. He could spend the night as guest of Garcia's reluctantly extended hospitality here in a jail cell, or he could sleep in the open on the hillside, perhaps to be denied entry at the fortress gate in the morning. He himself had been an absolute monarch. He knew just how far one of these supreme beings could be pushed.

He made a conscious choice. Garcia had given his word. As worthless as this bond might prove to be, Obed had to trust the king—or he had nothing. Likely, Garcia would keep his promise because it was of such little consequence to the ruler. Garcia was working hard to build a firm foundation here. He was a harried and busy man. Obed and Elicia could not possibly be of more than passing concern for him, despite Elicia's fresh young beauty. Garcia did not truly care what became of the huge Mandingan, as long as he got him out of the fort, out of his sight.

Obed was somewhat astonished when a guard wakened him at dawn, unlocked the cell door, and led him to a room where he was fed warm bread and fresh milk.

Elicia and a guide awaited him outside the jail gates. Elicia ran to him and clung to his hand. They crossed the compound in the wake of the black guide. They were out of the fort and on their way down the slope before the inhabitants of the fortress were even awake. They could look back later and see the gray wisps of morning fires for a long time, signs that life went on in that place forbidden to them.

They followed a scabby road and rude paths north along the winding course of the black river. A heavy mist enshrouded the channel as the three of them descended the bluff. They moved into the ghostly trail, where veils of morning mists swirled around them, closing over them, obliterating them, denying their existence and obscuring their passing.

The black guide spoke not at all. When they spoke to him directly, he merely shrugged his shoulders or shook his head. They were able to cover about three miles in a hour through the rough forest. The morning sun rose, blood red, burning off the mists. At noon they stopped to rest. The guide produced smoked ham and bread from his knapsack. Silently, he shared the food with them. They sprawled in the shade of giant wild hickory trees and ate ravenously. They drank from the innumerable springs that bubbled from the ground and fed the river.

They walked five hours north from the fort, and when they came out into an opening of little over a squared acre, the guide stopped. He indicated a dilapidated shack with a nod of

his head. "This your farm," he said. He added, as if he had been ordered to do so, "You will stay here." He peered at Obed. "You will not be welcomed in the fort, even to buy goods."

"I understand." Obed nodded.

Obed and Elicia stood in the blaze of early afternoon sunlight. The cleared acre had reverted to fennel, wire grass, and sandspurs. The thick jungle enroached greedily on the scarred, open space from all sides. The shack was a single room with slanted roof of cypress shakes. A small front stoop sagged like something wounded. A magnolia tree shaded the house. Near this shade tree was one of those eternal springs that boiled from the earth and ripped gullies downslope to the river.

Staring at the forlorn shack, Elicia whispered, almost involuntarily, "Oh dear God."

Obed laughed. "Not much like Golden Leas, it it?"

These seemed the precise words to revive Elicia's flagging spirits. "You're right," she said, smiling. "It's not like Golden Leas at all. It's beautiful."

Obed said nothing. A front and rear door of the shack hung open. Two windows were without covers, the flaps having been torn away, perhaps to feed some transient's fire.

The guide said his brief farewell and departed. Exhausted, Obed and Elicia crossed the open ground. They knelt and drank the pure, chilled water from the stone-pocked spring. "Well, at least it's a deep, open spring," Obed said. "We'll have a lot of water."

Elicia laughed because at the moment a lot of water was all they had. They were in this place without implements, money, food, or furnishings. She had lived her entire life within the protected confines of the mansion at Golden Leas. Still, she regretted nothing. She would undo nothing. She had what she wanted.

Obed looked up from his knees beside the pool. He grinned at her and batted cold water toward her with his open palm. "We cannot pretend that we ever expected Garcia would give us very much."

Elicia still smiled. "I didn't believe he'd give us anything."

Obed laughed with her. "He has not. Not really. Maybe all

he gave us was a slow death. If he had left us the gun, at least we could have killed ourselves."

"Kill ourselves?" she cried. "We haven't begun to live."

"No, of course you are right," he reassured her, but his voice lacked conviction. He stared across the weed-covered acre of cleared land. How were they to clean it of weeds? By hand? He was certain that would be how it would be done. And once it was cleared? What then? What had they to plant?

He held her close in his arm and they walked slowly to the house. The single room was entirely bare, dust-encrusted. A huge fieldstone fireplace covered most of the north wall, and there were no windows on either side of it.

"I think Garcia sent us here to starve," Elicia observed. Her words were desperate, but her tone was light and even taunting.

Obed took her hand. They walked out to the slanted stoop and sat in a shady patch of the flooring, letting their legs dangle over it. They gazed at each other.

"Can you cook?" Obed asked.

"You mean if there were anything to cook?"

"Yes."

She smiled. "I'm a lady's maid. I've been a white girl's body servant since I was five years old. She was never taught to cook, and neither was I. . . . Do you know how to grow crops?"

He grinned. "You mean out there? In that sun? Where I came from I was a king. I had no training to be a farmer."

She looked at him, the sagging stoop, the tattered roofing, the fennel-swept clearing, the encroaching forest. He expected her to burst into tears. But she did not. She was a continual surprise to him, and she surprised him now. She laughed abruptly.

He stared at her."What do you find to laugh at?"

She went on laughing. "You. Me. Both of us. An ex-king and a lady's maid, trying to stay alive on a deserted farm."

He considered this and laughed too. "You think we will not?"

Her laughter rose. She managed to say, "I think we may not."

Her laughter was infectious. He said, laughing, "One thing I do know."

"What?" She could barely speak for laughing.

"We will die trying."

"Oh, we will. We will." She went off into peals of laughter which echoed and reverberated in the silences around them.

"And—we will die happy."

'Oh, my dearest king," she wailed in uncontrollable laughter. "I've never been happier."

They clung to each other, sinking to their backs on the porch plankings, laughing helplessly.

The days passed swiftly. Obed felt that this erratic flight of time was the doomed racing toward catastrophe. Time always hurried, out of kilter, when tragedy impended. It was almost like an tillerless craft on a river headed helplessly toward thunderous falls. Speed. Increasing speed, and no way to slow it down. He said nothing of this to Elicia. He certainly didn't want to add his fears to her already intolerable burden, just because he happened to believe the gods couldn't wait to watch men suffer. He told himself it was nothing more than superstition, a superstition reinforced by unhappy experience.

That first afternoon Obed killed a squirrel with a stone. Elicia gathered firewood in the narrow hammock between their spring and the open river. Obed was finally able to strike fire in heaped weeds and splinters in the sunlight and to nurse a flaring taper to the kindling in the fireplace. Soon a fire roared in the dried woods. He skinned and cleaned the squirrel with his bare hands. Soon the meat roasted on a sharp stick broken from an oak tree. They ate well and, lying close in each other's arms, slept deeply on the bare floor. Black bears disputed in the woods, panthers screamed, and distantly, along the river, wolves howled.

They began their second day with a nude dip in the tiny spring. As they splashed, Obed outlined his plan to dam up the pool with fieldstones and clay and make them a larger pond. Later, just to be accomplishing something, he found fieldstones and lifted the corner of the frame house and braced up the sagging stoop.

"Already the place looks better," he said, standing back to admire his handiwork.

"Looks like a castle," Elicia told him. She felt his biceps with both hands. "How many women have a husband who can lift a corner of a house with his bare hands?"

He grinned. "Not many, I would bet you."

"You know something else? I'm hungry. Swimming and hard work always makes me hungry. Even when somebody else does it."

They gathered blackberries and wild haws and sat on the repaired stoop, eating them.

Before noon that day, a black man named Homer and his wife, Annie, appeared from the deep woods.

Homer said they lived on a farm two miles inland. They had been in their house for almost a year. They had brought in crops of peanuts, indigo and vegetables, carrots, corn, and turnip greens.

The visitors stared at the barren shack, the sun-braised open field. Annie said, anguished, "What will you do?"

"Survive," Obed told her. "We are two very stupid people. We are not smart enough to know we cannot exist on nothing."

"We can't help much," Annie said. "We have so little. Homer and I worked the cotton fields up in Alabama. We came with nothing. Others out here helped us. We must try to help you."

Obed and Elicia walked home with their neighbors through the forest. The farmhouse was as unpainted and sun-petrified as Obed's but it was furnished, if sparsely, with necessities, hand-hewn tables and chairs made from native timbers. Annie prepared chicken and dumplings with ears of corn and sun-dried brown field beans. Obed and Elicia ate hungrily. He kept telling Annie it was a feast, a royal feast.

They returned home with seeds, seedlings, and an ancient handplow with a twisted blade. "It doesn't plow very deep or very straight," Homer said. "But it was given to us when we came. It's better than digging with your hands."

"But not much," Annie warned. The next day Obed worked for hours beating at the plowshare with fieldstones; he straight-

ened it slightly, but not very much. It had been tormented out of shape for a long time.

Obed and Elicia found themselves less alone than they had believed they would be. Half a mile inland wound the trail south to Negro Fort. The Apalachicola was a busy thoroughfare. Boaters sighted chimney smoke and hove-to for a visit. Each visitor left something, never very much, but another possession to help them exist—a box of sulphur matches, a couple of scratchy blankets, a hammer with a broken claw.

Everybody had bits and pieces of news and rumor, little of it hopeful or encouraging. Every man headed upriver from Negro Fort was asked the same question by Obed: Had Alexander Arthbunot returned? Was there any word from the trader?

One man shook his head, but smiled encouragingly. "Arthbunot will turn up. Like a bad penny. Can't say when . . . He owns a trading post on the Suwannee River, you know. . . . Also, he's a kind of spy. He keeps the fort and the Indians warned what Jackson and the Americans are up to."

The latest word from Negro Fort was that Jackson had sent "peace emissaries" to call on Garcia. The gist of Jackson's message, formally delivered by six ornately garbed military officers under a white flag, was, in part: "I come into Florida not as warrior, but as a peacemaker. We can have peace between the United States and Spanish Florida. If the niggers and redsticks want peace, I will act in peaceful ways. They have only to agree to my terms. Let them lay down their arms. Let the indentured niggers return north to their rightful owners. Let the redsticks agree to move to free lands west of the Mississippi River. Let there be an end to the murderous redstick raids on American farms and American farmers and American property. If you children of mine will obey me, I will treat you well. If you oppose me, I shall chastise you—to the last woman and child."

This peace offer had been greeted with hoots of derision and ridicule. The peace emissaries were permitted to leave the fort unharmed but were pelted with human excrement all the way down the cliff to their boats. The outraged officers

departed, vowing vengeance, swearing to return and repay the desecration of American authority.

Obed tried to concentrate on his farm and to close his mind to the growing tensions between Negro Fort and the invader who was said to be, at the moment, attacking the Spanish fort at Pensacola.

Obed found himself praying at night to his gods that word would come soon from Alexander Arthbunot. He began, unwillingly, to doubt the freebooting Scot as he mistrusted all other white faces, despite Arthbunot's long record of service to displaced Indians and fugitive blacks. It was not neglect or betrayal. Arthbunot was too harried, too busy. He couldn't take the time to look to the fortunes of a dispossessed black who wanted safe passage east to Dakar, a passage that likely was impossible to procure, anyhow.

Sick inside, as the weeks passed, Obed decided he could trust only himself. But when his faith was at lowest ebb, some small good thing occurred to restore his hope, if only temporarily. One of the neighboring farms held a "peanut boiling" party, and Obed and Elicia were invited. They attended with Homer and Annie, these two glowing with anticipation like children. Other blacks came from farms four or five miles removed in all directions, walking or riding razor-backed mules, cushioned only by folded blankets.

Obed stood, towering, in the laughter and gospel singing, unable to believe this noisy celebration was part of that same unsettled, dangerous world where Andrew Jackson's forces poised, simply waiting for governmental approval, or some border incident, as excuse of invade and destroy the Indian tribes and the new black nation.

He watched the other blacks laughing and dancing. They ate boiled peanuts, roasted ears of corn, and watermelons. They drank white corn whiskey. They talked about their crops and the prices they were paid by the buyers at the wharves below Negro Fort.

Empty-bellied, he tried to reconcile this hope and laughter with the reality of doom. These people actually had adjusted to the incredible rigors of exile and abject poverty. They were pulling themselves up out of it. Given time, they might build

something of permanence. Only he knew this was the joker. There was nothing permanent in this loud night.

Time was running out. The white man was coming, his drums rattling, his guns blasting, his sabers slashing.

He and Elicia walked back home between two A.M. and dawn, leading a milk cow, in fresh and donated by a black couple they'd never even met before. "You can't live over there without milk," the woman said to Elicia.

Neither Elicia nor Obed bothered to tell the generous soul that neither of them knew how to milk a cow. They would learn. They had plenty of wild grass for the cow to graze, plenty of fresh water for her to drink.

Piled and secured on the cow's ample back were other gifts, seeds to plant, bags of yams and potatoes. They were advised to cut the eyes off all the potatoes and plant them. "In a few months you'll be eating potatoes of your own regularly."

They walked in the darkness, Obed's arm about Elicia. She leaned against him. When she faltered, exhausted, he took her up gently in his arms and carried her for three miles while she slept with her head on the soft inside of his shoulder.

In the deep heat of that summer it all began to unravel. The river was suddenly loud with terrorized refugees in full flight. Jackson had conquered Spanish Pensacola, arrested its governor, and set up his own military officers in command of the region. He claimed the territory in the name of the United States whether he'd been afforded authority to do so or not. He gave as his reason the lack of Spanish strength to keep the peace and insure American safety below the border.

From there Jackson had turned again east and south, tired of waiting for approval to invade from an effete, namby-pamby government which, to his eternal outrage, had surrendered Canada, as Jackson swore he would never give up the South to alien powers. When warned by eastern-state and New England congressmen that he violated the Treaty of Ghent, the general trembled with rage. As far as he was concerned, the Treaty of Ghent had been signed by United States traitors. He believed the government in Washington, D.C., had never had any intention of honoring its word in

accepting the treaty. He warned his own officers to ignore any War Department directives unless they came through him as the only "correct conduit" for such orders. His eyes wild, his scrawny neck livid, the general swore to anyone who would listen that he acted only in highest patriotism. No one in his presence dared question this. Nobody dared to stop him in this patriotic mission of manifest destiny, he raged, not even the President himself. . . .

Obed was fighting the twisted plowshare in the open field when Billy Panther and a company of Indians appeared suddenly from the underbrush. A youthful white man named Robert Armbrister accompanied them. One moment the forest was silent, the next Obed was staring at those stolid red faces surrounding him.

Billy Panther greeted Obed warmly. Obed was unable to keep from inquiring at once if they was any word from Alexander Arthbunot.

Robert Armbrister answered him. Armbrister was a British subject who'd remained behind after the British relinquished the Gulf Coast. Armbrister was also Arthbunot's lieutenant.

"I can tell you this much," Armbrister said. "Alex has spoken of you. So far, he has been unable to obtain the safe passage he seeks for you. But he still believes that he will."

Billy Panther said, "Mr. Armbrister has brought the Indians under Billy Bowlegs a letter from Mr. Arthbunot. He warns that Andrew Jackson intends to invade south, driving the Indians before him into the gulf unless they surrender. He will use as reason the fact that he requested safe passage for American supply and troop ships up the Apalachicola to Fort Scott and Garcia has threatened to fire on any American ship that comes near Negro Fort. Jackson has demanded the Indians meet with him near St. Marks in peace councils, on his terms, or on the battlefield."

"There is no way we can stop Jackson's army from marching south," Robert Armbrister said. "The Spanish have no arms left, no army at all closer than Amelia Island, and there it is only a token garrison."

"Jackson is demanding that we surrender unconditionally or fight to the death," Billy Panther said. "I have come from

councils with Bowlegs and Wildcat and the others. They have made only one decision, but it is one I support with all my heart and all my strength and all my people."

"What is that?" Obed spoke with a sense of sick helplessness.

"We have followed Jackson's rules of war before. We have met him in his kind of open battle. He has slain entire tribes. He has sent the rest of us who survived running from our lands, which he had assigned to us in previous treaties, into Florida to hide. It is his rule and not ours that we must stand and fight him in his kind of open battle when he has cannon and we have lances. He acts as if war is a game with rules. His rules. But Bowlegs has vowed: the Indians will never stand and fight this madman in the open again. . . . If he wants to kill us, let him search the swamps and the jungles to find us. He will see us no more than he will see the wind."

XXIX

As suddenly as Obed and Elicia had entered their impoverished little paradise, they departed it.

They walked together, Elicia stubbornly leading her milk cow, with the band of Indians and the Englishman Armbrister. Obed tried to smile when their gazes met, but he plodded along, empty and without hope.

Billy Panther had urged him to join in ambush battle against Jackson's invading troops. "It's your war now," Billy Panther said. "If they come here, they will burn you out, kill you, or take you prisoner."

Obed nodded, but then protested. "I can't leave Elicia here."

"No. We take her with us. She will be safe in Panther Town."

Obed doubted this. Jackson's armies would seek out the settlements of tribal leaders first to destroy, it seemed to him. He said, "Wouldn't she be safer at the fort?"

Robert Armbrister peered at him. "Haven't you heard about Negro Fort?"

"What about it?"

"The fort is under siege. United States gunboats are shelling the bluff from the river below."

Obed exhaled heavily. "Are they in great danger up there?"

"It is almost over for them," Armbrister said. "I would stake my life on that. Garcia has made mistakes. His biggest has been in ridiculing Jackson's emissaries.It is like spitting in Jackson's face . . . I believe their fate is sealed at the fort."

Armbrister was well informed on the matter of Negro Fort. It was his business to know as much about actions of the invaders as possible. "The way Jackson has arranged for it to look, as if he were goaded into action against Fort Blount, is by requesting safe passage for American supply boats up the Apalachicola when he knows in advance that Garcia will never grant it. So Jackson stations Colonel Clinch up at Camp Crawford, about one hundred and fifty miles above Apalachicola Bay on the Chattahoochee River. Camp Crawford can best be supplied by water. So they requisition a supply of provisions, with ordnance stores, two eighteen pounders and one howitzer, to ascend the river to Camp Crawford, knowing that hostile Indian and Negro attitudes guaranteed the opposition Jackson wanted. General Gaines and Colonel Clinch have orders, in case of opposition, to level Negro Fort.

"The convoy and vessels guarding it came upriver. Colonel Clinch sent one hundred men in boats downriver. They have been joined by Creek Indians friendly to the whites. A midshipman and four seamen sent to bring fresh water to the gunboats were killed or imprisoned by the Negroes. Colonel Clinch has landed and with the Creeks surrounded the fort, cutting off all communications with it, and firing spasmodically to harass the blacks inside. A party of Creeks were sent into the fort to demand its surrender, but they were attacked and abused and driven back, one of them with an American flag shoved up his asshole with a flagstaff. Garcia has hoisted the red flag with the English Jack over the fort. There is nothing for you there. There is no hope that your woman would be safe there."

Billy Panther tried to smile reassuringly. "She will be safe at Panther Town. My wives will care for her. They will hide her if that time comes. They will protect her."

Obed shook his head. "But Panther Town is well known. To enemy Creeks. To the Americans."

Billy Panther smiled. "Old Panther Town was known. There is a new Panther Town now. That is where we shall take the woman so that she shall be safe."

Obed felt a change come over him as he walked north beside Elicia. The Indians and the Englishman were silent.

All were tense, listening for any threatening sound in the wilderness. Obed supposed his ideas altered because of the hopelessness of their situation. Even the Indians seemed to believe they were defeated; they were fighting only to the moment of annihilation. They had no manpower to match Jackson's four-thousand-troop army. Even the gods appeared to have deserted them. They had much to fear from evil men if the gods were evil enough to put might in the hands of bloodthirsty invaders. Over and over, in a kind of sick frustration, they repeated it: "This land is ours. This is our last retreat. Spanish Florida belongs to Spain, in the eyes of civilized people and before God Himself. Civlized men met at Ghent and wrote the treaty returning all conquered lands to Spain. Only Spain rightfully owns the Floridas. What right have these butchers to come and slaughter our people, burn, mutilate, and rape?"

These words were no longer protest. They had become simply a helpless cry to the heavens, without hope, without faith anymore. And in this, he and Elicia were like the doomed Indians. There was no hope for them. There never had been, but for a little while they'd been happy on the cleared land. Now that was gone. He was taking Elicia to a place where she might hide while he went with outnumbered, outgunned men to fight a hopeless battle.

"When this is over," Obed said abruptly in the silence, gazing down at Elicia, "when I come back to Panther Town for you, we will leave this place. We will go away together."

She stared up at him, her eyes wide and lips parted. She had never heard these words from him before. He had told her he loved her, above all women he had ever known, all women he might ever know. But he said no more of their future together. He said his running was too rugged and dangerous. She could not survive it. Once, he had said he would make some kind of start and send for her, or come back for her. He had never said he would take her with him.

"Would you go with me?" he asked.

"I would go anywhere . . . I waited only for you to ask."

"I was always afraid before. For you. I was afraid I would get you into terrible dangers, get you hurt or even killed."

"Did you think that would matter as long as we were together?"

"I thought so. Once. I don't think so anymore. You know why I changed my mind?"

"You like to sleep with me."

He laughed so abruptly that all heads jerked around, staring at him. He touched Elicia's arm and pulled her tightly against him. "That is only part of it. There is more."

"Tell me more. I would love to hear the more."

"I have learned. These months together with you. We were left to starve at that cabin. But we did not starve. Whatever came, we shared it, and we faced it and we overcame it. I suddenly see that it is like that when we leave here. We must stay together. We must face it together."

Elicia gazed up at him, shaking her head. "It took you all this time to realize that? I could have told you that—from the first."

He sighed and nodded. "I had to learn. No matter what happens to us when we run, it will be something we can share, no matter how evil. I don't have to be afraid for you anymore . . . I know that whatever I can endure, you can stand, probably even better."

"I could have told you that."

"I want no life without you in it with me. Maybe I have no right to ask you to share my flight with me, but I want you in it, no matter how bad it may be, for both of us. . . . We cannot be afraid of what might happen to us. Not anymore. We have had nothing all these months. We have existed. We have survived. But we've had something even more than survival."

"Each other."

"Happiness. Maybe only because I am stupid. But I have been happier these months with you than I have ever been, at the easiest, pleasantest moments of my life."

"Well, I wouldn't know anything about that," Elicia said.

"Why not?"

She tugged on the rope, hurrying her reluctant milk cow. "Because I came alive only the first time you made love to me. . . . I know nothing of life or the world before that."

Like a hunted animal whose lair has been violated, Billy Panther had silently and stealthily moved his town and his people deeper into the river swamps.

They came suddenly upon this new town on a dry knoll inside a cypress swamp. It looked as if the old town had been transplanted, every hut, every stilt house, every corn grinder, every three-legged cook-pot, every dog, and every cow. On the small acreage above the water level and not mildewed and rotted by the green slime of the swamp, the Indians had planted their rows of corn and small plots of yams. It was almost as if the same pelts dried on the same stretched lines between the trees. The ground around the huts was already hardpacked and rutted. It was the same and yet it was not the same at all.

A tension crackled in this settlement in a break in the swamp, an almost tangible terror. Women, even children, seldom spoke above a whisper. There was no laughter. There seemed nothing left to laugh about. They had been pushed again, deeper into the swamps, farther into hiding, lower into a morass of despair.

Billy Panther's wives welcomed Elicia warmly. They had been told to expect her, and to treat her well. The Indian women were especially pleased to get a fresh cow to give so much milk.

"She will be safe here," Billy Panther told Obed. "As safe as any of us is safe."

Obed winced. This kind of safety was to him mortal peril, and he had brought Elicia into it. He swallowed back the bitter taste of sickness. He did not know what else he could have done. Billy Panther was right. This was his fight now. He had chosen to live in this place, and the invaders meant to deny him that right. It was his fight.

Armbrister was impatient to start west. "Jackson's army moves men and cannon along the Tallahassi Trail. If we can't stop them, we must harry them, we must ambush them until we can fight no more."

Billy Panther agreed. "It is a long march. We must move warily. Jackson has many Indians sent ahead as spies."

Elicia clung to Obed, biting back her tears. He held her for a long time, until all preparations for the quick march were completed. He tried to smile. "Take care of our cow."

"We will be here when you get back."

"Take care of yourself. Run when they tell you. Hide when they tell you. Take no chances. Remember. I love you. I want you here when I come back."

She sighed, her voice hollow. "I'll wait," she whispered.

The band of about fifty braves, a few Negroes, and Armbrister moved through the forest to the rough-marked Tallahassi Trail. The roadway was more clearly defined now because Jackson had been deploying his four thousand troops and their horses and gear along it.

Bowlegs sent two of his smartest scouts ahead to search for the Creek point men spying in advance of Jackson's troops.

"If you sight them first and are so well concealed you can kill them with arrows, kill them. Hide their bodies, dispose of their horses. If there is chance of your encounter being found out by the army, steal away quickly. Come back and let us know what you have found and where you have found them." Billy Bowlegs swung his arm. "If the Creeks steal upon you in the wilderness, you are dead and we will say prayers for you—and for ourselves."

It was the middle of the following morning when the scouts came at a fast trot back along the trail. Billy Panther whistled like a whippoorwill and the men came off the roadway.

"We found two of the Creeks," one of the scouts said. "We threw their corpses and the carcasses of their horses into the river."

Bowlegs said, "Did you wait to look at the army?"

"It is a huge company. They march by two along the trail. With their cook wagons, supply carts, and cannon, it takes a long time for them to pass a tree."

Bowlegs nodded. "We will dig in here. We will let the first of the line pass. At my whistle, we will attack. We will fight until they are able to set up their guns against us, then we will run."

Obed said, "May I say we are no match for even a short battle?"

Bowlegs stared at him. "What would you have us do?"

"Their guns will kill many of us if we stand and fight. Even for five minutes. Their guns will kill many of us."

"We knew there would be losses," Bowlegs said.

"But cannot we cut our losses?" Obed said. "Cannot we make sure they take the losses?"

"And how would you have us do that?"

"By not standing to fight at all. By not attacking in the open at all. Let us attack. For no more than two or three minutes. If we kill quickly and by surprise, there will be a few moments of panic. By the time they can regroup, we should be gone. We would take no losses, and we could choose another place to ambush them. We would choose the place to attack. We would never attack in the open, and never for more than three minutes."

Bowlegs considered this for some moments and then shook his head, almost angrily. "What will this accomplish?"

"It will do for us whatever we plan for it to do," Obed said.

"I beg you, Bowlegs," Panther said. "Listen to my friend."

Bowlegs shrugged his shoulders. "What would you plan?"

"They march as they will. With horses. Wagons. Carts. Cannon. If we hide here and attack only when the caissons are passing, if we kill only horses and the men who tend them, we stop them. Only for a little while. But they are stopped while they bring fresh animals and hitch them. We cannot face their cannons, but we can make them pay for hauling them. If we strike often enough, and quickly enough, and always at their animals, we may even deny them their cannon, unless they pull them themselves."

Billy Bowlegs considered this for some moments. He nodded his head. "It shall be as you say."

The Indians dug into the brush along the Tallahassi Trail, becoming a part of the scrub oaks, the cabbage palmettos, the tall grass. They waited in silence.

It seemed a long time before the first of the regiments appeared on the roadway. The volunteers marched with bravado, a kind of arrogance that came from their easy victory over the Spanish at Pensacola. They made no attempt to move silently. Cadence drums rattled, larger drums resounded, the metal of caissons and gear shattered the silences. The first mounted regiment passed followed by hundreds of foot soldiers, armed and two abreast. They were a long time passing. When the first of the caissons lumbered into view, Obed

touched Billy Panther's arm. Billy uttered the preliminary whistle and the Indians raised themselves, bow and arrows ready.

The heavy artillery was already passing before the first arrows were sent whistling from the silent undergrowth. Even when dray horses fell in their traces it was some moments before the tired, bored soldiers reacted. A second flurry of arrows slew other animals. When the first of the mounted soldiers galloped forward, their horses were shot from under them. An in that same terrible silence, the howling of men, the squealing of wounded animals which would have to be disposed of, rattled in a din of confusion.

As suddenly as the attack had begun, it ceased. Soldiers on the road grouped and were fanned out in companies to search out and kill the ambushers.

They found nothing. The Indians had disappeared totally, without leaving a sign to follow. One squad of armed soldiers outran the others and followed deeply into the forest. They were set upon in silence, murdered and scalped. By the time searchers found them, the forest hummed with silence and emptiness. The Indians had withdrawn.

After a delay of three hours in which fresh horses were hitched to the casissons and the wagons, the dead men buried, the march was resumed. Now, new scouts were sent out ahead. Panther's men slew them and hid the bodies. Twenty miles up the trail, the same terrible, unsuspected attack occurred. Horses and men were slain in two minutes of total confusion, followed by a sudden and complete silence.

Officers now sent out armed squads to search the woods, but this time warned them to stay together, to abandon the search in an hour. The hostlers were still moving new dray animals in place when the search squads returned. They had found no trace of Indians. It was almost as if, had they not seen the dead horses, the abrupt carnage, they would not have believed there had been an ambush at all.

The harried officers chose this site to make camp for the night. This early stop would make them late for their rendezvous with the general at St. Marks, but at the moment this did not seem important. Officers wished to have time before nightfall to reinforce camp and perimeter security, to protect

the tired troops from further ambush during the long night. Too, they were more than a little demoralized by attacks from Indians they didn't see and could not find. Redsticks that refused to stand and fight. And, like the ancient messengers who were beheaded by despots when they brought bad news, the officers of highest rank dreaded carrying information of the slaughter of their dray animals to General Jackson. They wanted one more opportunity to engage the murderous savages in open daylight. Perhaps that chance would come tomorrow and they would redeem themselves and arrive in glory at the general's encampment.

Mounted messengers on their way north arrived in the campsite before dusk. They carried news of an American victory at Negro Fort, a total conquest. After four days of siege, in which Clinch's men were reinforced with two gunboats which took up positions in front of the enemy battery, success had come abruptly and stunningly. At first it had looked as if the Negroes on the high bluff would prevail. The defenders of the fort opened fire upon the gunboats from a thirty-two pounder. The biggest cannon replied from the gunboats. At the fifth discharge, a hot-shot, lobbed upward from Gunboat 154, arched into one of the powder magazines inside the fort. That first explosion was devastating. It was followed by chain-reaction detonations in the ammunition dump. The entire fort was quickly ablaze. Further defense was impossible. From the river they could hear the screams of people engulfed in the fires.

The first reports claimed at least one hundred black soldiers and civilians, along with twenty-five Choctaws and over two hundred women and children, were slain. Not more than fifty escaped the effects of the explosion. These survivors wandered dazed, insane with fear, down the cliff and were taken prisoner by Colonel Clinch's men. The Americans sustained no loss whatever. It was all over at Negro Fort. Garcia had been captured and would be carried before General Jackson at St. Marks.

The regimental officers heard this news and in their jubilation forgot their own humiliating losses sustained all day from an unseen enemy. Grog and whiskey were issued and a wild victory celebration turned the forest into a firelit madhouse.

From a safe distance, Bowlegs's people scouted the encampment. Bowlegs was pleased with the actions of the day. He embraced Obed. "I will go before the Council of the Nations at Old Town," Bowlegs said. "I will expound your wisdom which makes our own wisdom greater. Our nations have agreed never to stand and fight Jackson and the Americans again. But now we will go a step beyond. We will disappear south as the rains blow away. We will be found no more." He laughed. "Which does not mean we will not seek out and find them. On our own terms."

The day had not been a total success. Their forces had suffered only one casualty, but this was a formidable one. Robert Armbrister had been unable to hide as the Indians hid. Sometime during the afternoon he had been taken prisoner by an army search party.

"Name of God," Obed said. "He has on him the letter to Bowlegs from Arthbunot."

"We can pray he destroyed it before he was taken," Bowlegs said.

"We can pray that he had time to destroy it," Obed said. Somehow, despite the victories of the day, this capture of Armbrister seemed an omen of defeat for Obed. His hopes sagged and his mood worsened.

Sometime between two A.M. and daybreak that morning, a small party, led by Bowlegs, Panther, and Obed, slithered through the underbrush to the rope corral where the army's animals were staked for the night. Three army guards were slain before they could cry out. The ropes were cut and the horses driven off into the swamp. The Indians were still herding the animals into the wilderness long after daybreak. By the time an army search party arrived on foot, all signs of the Indians had disappeared.

"Let them have their cannon," Bowlegs said. "Now they can haul them by themselves."

"If they live to get back to St. Marks," Panther said, "Jackson will kill them."

Ten miles down the Tallahassi Trail, Bowlegs took his party of braves and turned south toward the Suwannee River country and the gathering of Indian nations at Old Town. The parting with Panther and Obed was brief but warm.

Panther led his company at double time into the forests headed for the cypress swamps and his settlement. Obed loped along beside him.

Neither of them could say when the first terrible premonition of wrong struck them. They only knew the warmth went out of the day. They were bone-cold in the blaze of sunlight. They were aware only of something deadly evil; they did not know what it was, and they were not prepared for the holocaust they found at Panther Town.

The village had been totally destroyed by soldiers, left in ashes. The corn rows had been trampled methodically by men on horseback who had taken their time riding up and down the lines. The gardens of the women had been desolated. Every hut had been shattered to the ground and burned. Every structure had been razed. Nothing remained alive. Cows, dogs, horses, pigs lay slaughtered and bloated in death. The stench was overwhelming. Flies swarmed in black clouds over the dead. Bodies of children, scalped or decapitated, lay sprawled where they'd been slain. Old men had been run down by men on horseback, slaughtered with sabers and left to rot where they fell. From dozens of long, peeled pine poles the severed heads of the tribal women looked down on the ruin of their lives, the slaughter of their animals, the extinction of their tribe, the burning of their homes.

A hot breeze raked the incinerated encampment, rattling dead leaves across the cleared, trampled ground. Obed heard the guttural moaning of the men around him. Billy Panther had toppled to the ground and buried his face in the ashes.

"Elicia," Obed whispered. He moved through the carnage and then he found her. Her head had been severed from her body and stared down at him from one of the poles.

Obed sank to his knees before it and wept. He did not move, even when after a long time he heard the Indians stirring around him.

XXX

Obed and Billy Panther embraced in the unearthly silence of the devastated settlement. They stood in the middle of the death, the stench, the ashes. Both were numb with overwhelming grief. They could not even speak of their agony and loss. There was the unbalanced look of nightmare about the razed camp. They couldn't yet believe what they saw. They moved only woodenly; they spoke in dead, empty tones and batted unseeingly at the blood-swollen flies muzzing about their faces.

They stepped back and gazed at each other, faces grim and set, yet expressing deepest emotions of sorrow and loss at parting.

"Where will you go?" Billy Panther said.

Obed shook his head. "I am going on to New Orleans at last." He looked around at the desolation and death. "It doesn't matter now what happens to me. It could not be worse than this."

Obed shuddered slightly in a cosmic despair, an emptiness of mind and heart and soul. But along with this unspeakable anguish, he sensed a new fearlessness born of total indifference. He was no longer afraid of these civilized white men. No matter what else they did to him now that they had brutally slain Elicia, they could never hurt him again. Physical pain of his body held no threat of distress anymore. In the most terrible way they had won. They had killed a part of him. They had inflicted upon him an unbearable loss. But what he had left was beyond their futile power to touch.

Billy Panther reached out and touched his friend's arm for

the last time. He spoke in a soft, broken way. "I pray the gods walk with you."

Obed nodded, his dry eyes burning. "And with you, Billy Panther. You are a great man. You have given of yourself for your people. You have given everything for your people. May the gods reward you justly."

Billy Panther's body trembled slightly with a flaring of bitterness. He shook his head. "One does not look for justice anymore in Spanish Florida." He spoke in a low, flat tone.

Obed winced. He was deeply troubled about the rugged little man. A wildness glittered in Panther's black eyes, a glassy kind of insanity, a need for tears he could never shed, for vengeance denied him, for any hope of life after this intolerable loss. Obed said, "What do you do now?"

Billy Panther looked down at his smoke-blackened hands. He spoke almost as if reciting memorized lines, haltingly and uncertainly. "I will take my men and we shall walk south to Old Town. It is many miles on the Suwannee. It will take many days to walk. Our grief will have time to rest, to eat itself away inside us." His large head tilted slightly. "Bowlegs is already there, you know. The Indian nations have gathered there."

Obed wanted to encourage his friend at this final moment of their parting. Panther had so little to look ahead to. Obed wanted to find hope in his plans. But he saw none. He saw only the terror awaiting Panther. He bit his lip and said, "Won't Jackson bring his troops in pursuit?"

Billy Panther shrugged, and Obed saw that Panther had found his own brand of indifference to the threat of a madman invader. Like himself, Panther had been destroyed inside. There was nothing else the Americans could do to him that had meaning or power to rouse him.

"It does not matter what Jackson does now. It is the will of the Indian councils that we will not stand and fight him anymore. We will flow like the streams flow into the deepest forests. If Jackson wants us, he must follow—and fight us where he finds us." His fists clenched at his sides. "If he finds us. . . ."

Obed nodded. "It is a wise plan."

"It is the last hope for a desolated, savaged people. We

proved we could strike and escape without losses, didn't we? We proved that when we slew or drove away their army horses into the night."

Obed nodded again. His smile was a grimace, but it was the best he could do. "Go then with the gods, Panther."

"And you, Brother. May you find your way home."

Obed headed west from the devastated settlement. He plodded, unhurried, sick with grief. He did not look back. He followed an Indian trail through the cypress swamp. Elicia's image kept swimming before his eyes, and sometimes he found himself blinded by mists in the watery ground.

At the burst of sudden gunfire from the direction of Billy Panther's razed town, he stopped.

He did not hesitate. He heeled around and ran, retracing his steps as swiftly as he could through the black ankle-deep water. There was no doubt. The attacking soldiers had left scouts hiding in case any of the braves returned to Panther Town.

Obed slowed and knelt, peering through a ring of willows and elders toward the blackened campsite. Panther and his men had been caught, unarmed, sick with grief, in the open.

Obed crouched there, holding the long rifle impotently in his hand. The gun was useless. Its single shot would merely alert the company of soldiers to his hiding place among the elder bushes.

He saw several Indians sprawled dead on the hard-packed ground. They looked as if they had heeled to run and had been shot in the back. By the time Obed reached the edge of the town site, the other braves, Panther among them, were laying down their guns and lifting their arms in surrender.

The soldiers—there were twenty-four of them under command of a lieutenant mounted on a cavalry horse—surrounded the Indians, guns at the ready. Billy Panther and his braves stood, immobile.

The lieutenant gave an order and the Indians were quickly thonged with short ropes, at the ankles, and their wrists behind their backs. The officer ordered them to move out. The Indians could take only short mincing steps. To hurry them, the soldiers struck them with their gun butts.

Sick with rage and helplessness, Obed watched from the concealment of the weeping willows. There was nothing he could do for Billy Panther. He was as helpless against twenty-five armed men as were the thonged braves. He shuddered. He could only crouch there, helpless. He had this one chance to get away, to somehow head one last time toward New Orleans. And yet he could not do it. In New Orleans, if he somehow made the long journey, were ships and at least a chance to escape this nightmare new world. If he stole away, he deserted Billy Panther, but there was nothing he could do for him now except watch his suffering and final defeat. Still, he could not leave. He could not walk away. There was nothing he could accomplish here. But he could not leave. He knew only this. This was still his battle, even when the fighting was over for all of them.

Before the company of soldiers had marched the shackled Indians to the rim of the burned-out town, the lieutenant saw the trek through thick forests was impossible with the Indians' ankles thonged.

The lieutenant lifted his gloved hand, halting the new-formed march. He twisted slightly in his saddle. "We'll make no time marchin' these murderin' redsticks to the fort for a firing squad. Line 'em up."

If the Indians understood the young officer, their dark faces revealed nothing. They stood, slack-shouldered, waiting.

"Maybe if we leave their carcasses here, we'll teach all them redsticks a lesson. The rest of their stealin', thievin', murderin' people will know how we'll deal with them." The lieutenant gestured angrily, his neck red, his face flushed.

The Indians were stood in a row in the midst of the desolated remains of Panther Town. The lieutenant reined his horse in beside Billy Panther. He said, "Are you the murderer they call Billy Panther?"

"I am Billy Panther."

The lieutenant nodded as if satisfied. He called for a rope, fashioned a slip noose, and placed it over Billy Panther's head, yanking it taut about his throat. "Untie Panther's legs," the lieutenant said. "We'll let the dog run beside my horse."

This pleased the soldiers, who shouted approval. Pleased with himself, the lieutenant watched while the thongs were

removed from Panther's ankles. "The great Billy Panther," he said. "And we ran him to ground. The general will be pleased when we deliver you, Panther. He hates you. His eyes go wild when he hears your name and your latest murder of white people in their beds."

Panther did not speak. He stood immobile, staring up at the red-faced young lieutenant.

The lieutenant lifted his sword in signal. The twenty-four soldiers lined up, their long rifles at their shoulders. The officer let the saber fall and the guns fired. The sounds reverberated in the silent swamp and put wild turkeys into flight.

The Indians toppled, crumpling where they stood. A squad was selected to make sure the Indians were dead. This was accomplished by thrusting swords into Indian sternums, and then by cutting off scalps with hunting knives. The squad was soon bloodied, the scalps of the dead braves secured to their belts.

"Head out," the lieutenant shouted. "We got us a long march. . . . But one thing we can be sure of, men. The general's going to welcome us with open arms."

In the middle of the morning of the second day, the troop reached General Jackson's camp on a forty-foot bluff above a river. Below the sheer cliff, flatboats were shoved ashore along the white bank of the river. Obed had not until this moment realized the might and pomp and military ceremony of the United States war machine. The fort was enclosed. Outside it lay a huge open field for parades, ceremonies, and hangings. Traders, homeless Indians hoping for food handouts, and derelict blacks were allowed to camp at the farthest perimeters of this immaculate *castra*. Near the sorry camps of friendly Indians were the horse corrals, supply wagon areas. Men worked or marched on all sides, a legion of three thousand men.

Without bothering to eat, almost afraid to sleep even when the soldiers made camp, Obed trailed the company to General Jackson's camp. He watched the soldiers torment Panther, forcing him to run beside the horse, letting him be dragged when he stumbled and fell. They did not feed him on the

march. Rations were short and issued to each man. He was given water to drink and lay trussed like a slain deer when the soldiers stopped at night.

Fevered, half out of his mind, Obed watched the company cross the grounds, going past a newly erected gallows and through the great gates. Not knowing what to do with himself now, Obed sank in concealment and stared toward that.

He stared in sick wonder at the officers coming and going through the gate of the walled stockade. He found it incredible that men who could slay children with knives and sabers and, on horseback, run down old men and behead them for the sport, who loudly proclaimed hatred for all niggers and anything with a red skin, could, at close view, seem ordinary men, laughing, talking. In his swirling mind it seemed impossible that they had families somewhere, homes and loved ones, and he watched them behave in a grotesque chivalrous manner that made integrity and honor seem a mockery.

To Obed's shock, he saw that the huge camp held more than white soldiers and hangers-on. Many Negroes and frightened, displaced Indians, sick and hungry, no longer part of any tribe, gathered like filings to a magnet at the rim of the vast open area.

At first Obed remained hidden in the underbrush, but as the sorry pack of miserable blacks and redsticks remained unattended and apparently unnoticed by the soldiers or officers of the fort, Obed moved out of the fringe of the forest and sat silently among the derelicts.

Obed's gaze finally was drawn to the two men hanging on the gallows. They swung in the faint breeze, their heads twisted oddly on their necks. People glanced toward the dead men casually, in passing, but no one moved to cut them down.

Obed stared. He recognized the British Armbrister first. They had wasted no time in hanging him after he'd been captured.

Obed's sick gaze moved to the fat man swinging in death beside Armbrister. He bit back the bile that gorged in his throat. The executed man was Alexander Arthbunot.

Obed was too dead inside to feel pain, or even sorrow. He did not even care that Arthbunot had never been able to help

him. Now he never would. And whatever he had been able to do for the fugitive Indians, he would do it no more. . . .

Obed was still sitting among the derelicts at noon the next day. He wanted to leave. During the night, when the camp finally grew quiet, he knew it was his last best chance to escape undetected. He could melt into the swamps and head west again.

But he did not move. He went on sitting there. He could not force himself to leave as long as Panther was imprisoned there. He, even in his delirium, told himself Bowlegs and the surviving tribes might mount a last, furious attack on Jackson's forces, and he could join them. But even as he thought this, he knew better. The Indians were gathering at Old Town and they were never coming north of that place again. There was nothing he could do for Panther, and yet he could not leave.

At high noon the camp stirred to feverish activity. Thousands of soldiers gathered by company, battalion, regiment, with their flags and ensigns on the parade grounds. The tattoo of drums did not cease. Bugles sounded and caissons rolled into place. The troops of cavalry lined up in the sun.

Suddenly the parade grounds went wild. The encampment rang, reverberated, echoed with the thunderous shouts, cheers, and open weeping that went up from every corner as General Jackson and his aides finally appeared when the great gates were pushed full open and held.

The soldiers stood slack in the sun until these highest-ranking officers appeared from the command center, walking ahead and promising the appearance of the general himself. Then the soldiers straightened. They stood at rigid attention and stared toward that opened gate. Sweat rolled down their faces, stung their eyes, salted their lips and discolored their uniforms. Swarms of gnats settled on their cheeks and crept along their eyelids. Not one man dared to swat at the insects. A few tried to twist their lips and blow upward inconspicuously to unsettle the bugs. Heat rash glowed red and intolerable along their collars and seared their crotches. They stood unmoving.

Watching the general approach slowly through the gate,

walking slowly and succumbing slightly to a nagging gouging pain in his side, Obed stared incredulous at the most outstanding American alive. The weeping homage paid by Jackson's own troops testified to this. They not only loved him, they deified him.

A canvas chair was brought out by two smartly clad privates and placed beside a long pinewood table under a gently furling flag, and the general walked painfully toward it.

Obed stared sickly across the sun-braised field at this supreme commander. Though he had never been told what sort of man the general was, he knew him on sight. He did not need to inquire the identity of this stalking skeleton in braid and medals. Those unblinking eyes, like a falcon's eyes, fixed and terrible under sandy, bushy brows, glittering, that shrill whining Tennessee voice, that imperious manner.

The general was in his early forties. He stood tall, vulture-thin, racked with a persistent cough, a lingering lung fever and a stricture in his side that caused him to spit blood and had reduced him to a skeleton. A constant "crick in the neck" forced him to cock his head at an odd, hostile angle, as if he withdrew from all human contact, looking down along that hawk nose at all lesser men. He looked to be at least sixty years old.

General Jackson walked to a pinewood table set within ten yards of the gallows. The sun blazed in the general's deep set eyes, burning in the shards of pain reflected there. Other officers stood or sat near him, but he seemed unaware of them. His staff of officers looked exhausted, but the general had no time for sleep; anyway, he was in constant pain, unable to rest. These officers revered their commander; they understood that they were on call with him a full twenty-four hours every day.

The general waved his arm in a signal. A small gate in the stockade wall was shoved open. A squad of prison guards convoyed a chained man out to the scaffolding. Armbrister's and Arthbunot's bodies were at last cut down from the crossbars. The corpses were allowed to sprawl in bloat and rigor mortis on the ground where they fell.

Obed sat forward, ill. He recognized Billy Panther's squat,

thick body though the Indian's head was concealed under a black hood.

Billy Panther was led up the plank steps to the gallows platform. The drum rolls continued. A hangrope was placed about Panther's neck and secured.

The drums rattled. At a sudden signal, the trapdoor was dropped and Panther's body lunged downward, jerked to a halt abruptly, the neck broken. The dead man bounced and dangled at the end of the hangrope.

Obed bit back the agony gorging hotly in his throat. He stared unblinking at Billy Panther until the corpse stopped dancing and hung, inert on the gallows rope.

But this nightmare for Obed was not yet over. General Jackson stood up and spoke, for the first time addressing not only his officers around him, soldiers at parade rest near the gallows, but the gathering of derelicts at the brink of the clearing.

"We are engaged in a desperate struggle to secure the safety of Americans on the southern frontier of our beloved nation. We have been too long harried by unreasoning savages like the redstick Billy Panther, who dies here today. Like other renegades and half-breeds and prophets, inciting the misguided blacks and rebellious Indians to hostile acts against us. The Spanish cannot control their subjects, though we have warned them. And the British continue—with agents like the reprehensible Alexander Arthbunot, who lies dead there like a wild beast—are supporting, encouraging, feeding, and abetting the redsticks. We will tolerate this no longer.

"I am a kindly man. I look upon niggers and redsticks as my children. They have minds like children. And I understand this. I ask only that they obey me. I have ordered this savage Billy Panther hung as warning to all the other nations of redsticks. We will no longer tolerate your rebellion against us."

As he spoke, the general leaned forward across the table. His voice rose and quivered with emotion. His voice raged, growing shrill. He turned to his officers. "Cut the redstick's body down. Now. While these people can see. Chop out his heart and nail it on the scaffolding. I want these savages to see

and understand what will happen if they threaten the tranquility and security of civilized men."

Even hearing the order, Obed did not believe the bestiality, the inhumanity, would be perpetrated. But three army butchers with meat axes, saws, and knives came at a run. They had been standing ready for this command. Billy Panther's body was cut down. The corpse struck the scaffolding deck and fell to the ground. The butchers stood over the body as if it were an animal carcass to be quartered. Axes drove into the thick chest, splintering the ribs which were then torn away. Meat cleavers and knives hacked out the heart from the open chest. One of the butchers thrust his hand into the bloody pit and yanked the severed organ out in his fist. He stood holding it aloft in his hand while soldiers and officers alike cheered lustily.

Obed, insane with grief, outrage, and fever, lunged upward, yelling from the depths of his lungs. "No."

The word wailed out of him. His mouth stretched wide. The sound was like the blare of army trumpet across the parade field.

For one instant, silence struck the entire compound, the cheering soldiers, the exulting officers. They stopped, staring around them. They had heard the cry, but they could not credit it at this moment of supreme victory.

General Jackson himself recovered first. His voice shrilled, "Arrest that nigger."

Armed soldiers broke ranks and ran toward where Obed stood, his legs apart, his head back, howling in protest. He kept shaking his head, kept sobbing "No! No!" over and over.

Suddenly, staring at the soldiers running toward him, Obed heeled and ran through the crowd of stunned derelicts. These people fell away before him. Two soldiers reared up suddenly in his path. They yelled at him to halt. Before they could bring up their long rifles, Obed bowled into them. He knocked them over, sent them sprawling backward. He did not hesitate. He stalked over their prone bodies, racing toward the brink of the cliff over the river.

Behind him, rifles crackled. He did not hear them. He heard only the cries of dying men. Soldiers pursued him. But

he did not see them. He saw only Elicia's severed head on a peeled pine pole, Billy Panther's heart clutched aloft in a bloody fist.

Grapeshot whistled about his head. He reached the edge of the bluff and leaped outward. He did not even slow down or look back. He tried to straighten himself so he could strike the solid pane of water, heels first. It did not matter. This was no longer his battle and these soldiers could not stop him. He was free and he knew he was free.

The soldiers raced down the embankment. But by the time the first of them reached the river's edge, Obed, swimming underwater, had grasped a flatboat, pulled it out into the swift current. It raced along. The last they saw of him, he levered himself inside it and used an oar to propel it faster on the racing tide.

XXXI

Hammond Maxwell entered the massive doors of the St. Louis Hotel from the corner of Royal and St. Louis streets. The doormen bowed him through and he strode up the wide marble steps and into the vast lobby with that innate air of arrogance that often got him hated on sight, but always bought him deference. His inferiors, peers, and superiors alike reacted to him uncertainly because even if they couldn't accept him at his own evaluation, they were somehow forced into a grudging respect.

As always when he entered the old hotel, a rush of memories swept through his mind of other visits in this swank Vieux Carré inn, fragments really, not fully formed enough to be thoughts. Images. Pictures. Vignettes. Also, arrival in these familiar streets and this splendid hotel always roused in him a feeling of luxury and power. His was the power that secured all this, and the St. Louis afforded him the luxury worthy of his position and power. Deep inside, he admitted that he harbored a faint uneasiness since he had been attacked by the seven-foot Mandingan back at Falconhurst. The assault outraged more than intimidated him. It was the first time in his life he had been struck by a Negro; it didn't sit well. It changed the color of everything around him; it affected his inner mood and inner confidence. That rage and need for reprisal festered there and would never release him until the unspeakable wrong had been atoned. There was no place in this world for niggers who didn't know their place, who dared speak to, much less strike at a white man.

Because he tipped well, supercilious black bellhops, re-

splendent in sky-blue uniforms with rows of tiny silver buttons, recognized him on sight and snapped to attention, showing him warm smiles and bright teeth. The clerk at the marble-topped desk smiled and bowed in welcome. Two of Ham's body servants carried his carpetbags, which he ordered released to the bellhops. Bellhops and servants disappeared, going up a rear staircase to the suite reserved for the young master of Falconhurst. Assured that his room was ready, Ham started across the lobby to the winding staircase, when someone spoke his name.

"Hammond Maxwell. Ham. You old red fox you."

Hammond turned slowly. When he recognized Lewis Gassaway from Benson, he smiled and extended his hand. "Lewis, what you doin' down heah?"

"Had I knowed you was comin', Ham, I would have traveled along with you."

"Made plans sort of precipitous," Ham said. "I been wanting to git away from Falconhurst for a long time."

"Good Lord, you got away. All the way to Africa."

Hammond winced slightly and exhaled. "That was a little different. That was business. Business that didn't turn out too well, I admit. No, I been wanting to leave Falconhurst for an extended trip. Maybe to the Texies. Might go, this time."

"You're joking." Lewis touched his friend's elbow and propelled him toward the bar where salesmen, auctioneers, and plantation owners drank and talked boisterously. They found a table, and Lewis ordered toddies for them. "You ain't really goin' to leave home, your paw ailin' an' poorly an' all like he is, are you?"

"Ain't made up my mind yet," Ham said. He resented having his motives questioned. "Paw is sickly, but he has been for a long time. Falconhurst can git along without me for a spell an' it has to."

Lewis whistled between his teeth. "Wish I had money enough just to pick up and traipse off when I liked. Course I don't raise fancy blacks to sell like you folks at Falconhurst. I heard you brought yourself back a seven-foot Mandingan to stud for you."

"That's right." Ham sighed, looking around the room with a show of impatience. He disliked being questioned.

"He must of got away," Lewis said, grinning.

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"Because I seen your reward posters all the way south from Benson. Seven-foot Mandingan. Dangerous. You offering a fortune. I seen your posters on all the bulletin boards in town since I got here. If he's around, you surely should get him back."

Ham exhaled. "Where would a seven-foot nigger hide, eh?"

"That's right."

"Still, I'm kindly giving up hope of ever recovering the Mandingan. He's been gone from Falconhurst for some months now. I figure a prize animal like that, whoever came across him, just took him along and said to hell with my reward money. It hurts me to say it, but I figure he's been rustled away somewhere by nigger stealers." He shrugged. "He might even be dead by now."

"How'd he git away from you?" Lewis asked.

Ham flushed slightly and shook his head. "Just broke and run. We was trying to break him in, but he was plumb wild."

"Right straight from savage Africa, huh?" Lewis suggested.

"Plumb uncivilized. Right from a tribe up a river in Africa. I thought I could break him. Could of, if I'd had time. But he got loose. Somehow, he just broke loose." Ham shook his head, still unable to understand this.

Lewis smiled. "So you're down here really to check the auctions and the barracoons, eh?"

"Well, I'm going to look for that black. He cost me a lot of money. Money I don't intend to lose unless I have to." Ham sat a moment and regarded the glass in his fist. "Still, even if I find this buck, I may sell him off fast."

"Why would you do that? You could take him back to Falconhurst and break him in this time."

"That's it. I don't know. He's right wild. And since Mede died and this boy ran away, I kindly have give up on raisin' purebred blacks. They're like purebred horses. Sometimes they're just bred too finicky."

"When you reckon to head back to Falconhurst?"

"I told you. Don't know if I'm going back. Not for a spell. I want to check and see if I can find my lost Mandingan. If I

can, I got to figure what to do about him. If I don't . . . well, like I said . . . I been hankerin' for a long time to see the Texies. Figure this time I better go, or I never will. So I haven't really made plans. Stay here a couple weeks huntin' for the rogue nigger, then if'n I don't find him, I'll drift on west to the Texies."

"You want me to take any message to your paw?"

Ham shook his head. He did not bother to smile. "Don't need to. Paw and me understand each other. He knows my hankerin' to see the Texies. He's knowed this was comin' for a long time."

Lewis tried to smile. "I still cain't just believe you're goin' to really cut out and do it."

"Sometimes you got to make a move. I told Paw a long time ago. He made no objection. He wished me well. He knowed when he was young, he hankered for strange places and travel. And I need to git away. He knows that too."

"What about that big old farm with nobody to run it?"

"I tole you." Ham waved his arm impatiently. "Falconhurst is all right. Hit'll git by. It always been there. Always will be, I reckon. No. I don't worry about the farm or the niggers. What I truly regret and hate is this Mandingan nigger that done me dirt when I was tryin' to do so much for him. I could have done so much for him. Could have built a race of big, healthy Mandingans, right in Alabama. . . . God damn it. That son of a bitch. Broke and run. I tell you, Lewis, sometimes people just don't appreciate what you try to do for 'em. . . "

Obed walked unsteadily into the town limits of New Orleans. He had lived on the land for weeks. He had lost at least ninety pounds. It seemed to him he was always fevered, that his head was never truly clear. He reacted slowly, he moved awkwardly. He felt as if he were a hundred years old. He stopped looking at his hands because of the way they trembled.

New Orleans had hung out before him like a promise of heaven, a paradise awaiting him. But when he walked into the town, he knew that he had deluded himself again. The streets weren't golden. The canals weren't lovely, they were stinking open sewers.

The first signs he found were the wanted posters from Falconhurst. They were everywhere, printed in red ink. Now they featured his drawn likeness. He was wanted by Hammond Maxwell, who offered thousands of dollars reward money. Near these posters were others circulated by the Alabama state police. He was not described, but rewards were available to anyone with information on the death of two slave patrollers and the theft of state police property and animals.

Obed sighed and half-staggered away. His shoulders sloped round and his head sagged tiredly. At this moment he no longer looked like the regal seven footer who walked with head erect and shoulders squared. Still, he was a tower among men who were an average height of five feet two. He stood out in any crowd, even tattered, exhausted, and emaciated as he was. Where could he hide, even in this busy, uncaring city?

He wanted to lie down somewhere and rest. He wanted a square meal. God, he wanted so much. He wanted freedom. He wanted to blot out the nightmare images that had haunted him from Spanish Florida. He had run so far and he had at last come to the city on the great river. But what was there for him more than this brief taste of freedom? It was only a matter of time until slave patrollers or bounty hunters who made their living running down escaped blacks arrested and shackled him. No! He had worn those shackles at Falconhurst. He could never go back to that slavery. He would kill first. He would die first. . . . He wanted so little, and yet it seemed so impossible. Freedom! A place where there would never be any danger of bondage again. A place where the civilized white man could never torture him anymore. And yet he felt trapped. The very walls of the town seemed to be closing in on him.

As if drawn by a force too powerful to resist, he followed the winding shell-paved streets toward the wharves where he and Hammond Maxwell had left the *Eagle of the Sea* an eternity ago. A time when he'd been young and handsome and arrogant and invincible. Some other man. Some other lifetime. He cursed that other Obed, that self-indulgent, obdurate, imperious young ass who had followed two lying white

men into hell. Damn them all. He could hate them, but he was powerless against them. They could capture him, buy and sell him, and there was nothing he could do about it. There was no place even to hide. He was still free, but nobody had to tell him. This town was no paradise; it was a trap and he was caught in it.

He kept walking, remembering the streets he had ridden through with Hammond Maxwell when he arrived here, full of pride and haughtiness and a total lack of humility. Well, if that was what the gods wanted, they should be satisfied. He was humbled now. No mendicant begging on the street was more vile than he.

Something stopped him on the Vieux Carré street. Mendicant. Beggar. Panhandler. He watched the tattered people crouched along the walls, with their palms out, hats, tin cups, anything, begging, pleading. At least they were eating. A few pennies and they could buy coffee, a meal, maybe even a place to sleep. He was no better than they; he was lower because he had fallen further, he had lost more, needed more desperately. Here he wandered these rich streets, almost starved, hunted, exhausted.

He crouched against a wall and watched the other beggars for a while. They extended clawlike hands, they smiled fearful caricatures of smiles. They called out. They reached. Their penury screamed at the guilt inside the more fortunate.

At last he joined them. Crouched against a wall, he lowered his head as if in prayer and extended his trembling hand. He stayed there for a long time. No one even paused to look at him. Two beggars shoved him nearer a narrow alleyway. He was on their terrain. He had no right to beg on their territory.

At the corner of the alley he straightened slightly. The lowered head and the prayerful attitude bought him nothing. He admitted he stared at the ground because he could not bear to face the passersby, though they didn't even know him. Pride. It was like a lingering disease. It was still with him.

He kept his head up. He forced himself to smile humbly and servilely. He fawned, cringed, cowered, the way he had watched the Negroes do along these streets. They likely felt no more respectful than he did, but they knew something

important: they knew what the whites liked to see, what they paid a penny or two to see, if they liked the truckling.

"Please, suh," he whispered. "This boy hungry. This poor boy hungry. Help the po' hungry boy, suh."

Several men paused at his voice, his extended hand. God in heaven knew he looked emaciated enough. But he was too young, too big. There was work along the levee for blacks as big as this one. If the niggers wanted to live as freed men of color, that was all right, but they had to learn to earn their own way, by God. Each man changed his mind and walked away.

Sick, Obed slouched more, sinking even to one knee, looking perhaps as if he were disabled, his long, lean body twisted just slightly. He reached out his arm and tilted his head with the pleading smile. He stopped, cold. For a long beat his heart itself stopped.

Half a block away he saw a man striding toward him with the awkward, crippled step he remembered from his nightmares. It was Hammond Maxwell. He wore a black planter's hat, a black cape with a red silk lining. He walked in that strange, limping gait, swinging a gold-headed cane.

For that moment Obed remained crouched on his knee, immobile, unable to move. He wanted to sidle into the narrow, dark passageway and run. He wanted to hide. If Hammond Maxwell saw him, he would rip the city apart, with aid of the police, to run him to ground. All his running, and it was over.

He stayed where he was as Hammond Maxwell approached in a terrible slow motion. It seemed an eternity passed from the moment he glimpsed the master of Falconhurst until he came abreast of him. Obed closed his hand and dropped it to his side. He lowered his head and stared at the banquette. He held his breath and waited.

He saw Hammond's shoes, his trousers, the hem of his flowing cape. The legs did not slow. Hammond did not look left or right. He never gave the beggars anything. If one gave them a dime, they pursued in packs, begging.

Hammond stepped past him. A moment more and the planter would be gone. For this moment he would be safe.

Something gorged up in Obed. Safety was not what he

wanted. He stood straight suddenly. He said, "Mr. Maxwell. Ham Maxwell."

Hammond Maxwell stopped as if poled. He could not credit it that some black beggar dared speak his name on a public street. He heeled around. By this time Obed had stepped off the curb into the narrow passage. He stared directly at Maxwell and then retreated a step.

Ham Maxwell recognized him in a kind of sick jubilation. At first he did not believe his eyes. Then he saw the prize he had sought for so long, at arm's length now. He could cry out for help. He could seek official aid. He did what Obed gambled the rash, hot-blooded, and overconfident slave owner would do. Ham raised his cane and lunged toward Obed in the alley.

Obed allowed the cane to crack him across the shoulder. It jarred him to his toes, but it shook Maxwell too. For the moment the planter was off balance and this was all Obed asked of his gods.

He stepped forward and caught Maxwell about the neck, dragging him deeper into the dark, dank, and stinking alley. Maxwell cried out, but Obed's arm closed on his throat. Ham could only gasp aloud.

Obed yanked the cane from Maxwell's fist and clubbed him with it. When the white man was crouched on the muddy pavement, Obed yanked off the hat and cape, tossing them aside. Then he ripped free the poke of gold eagles he knew Maxwell always carried. There was nowhere near the amount Maxwell had stolen from him, but Maxwell was a rich man and always traveled well-heeled. It would be enough.

Maxwell cringed on the ground, afraid to move or cry out because he was certain the insane black would kill him. He felt Obed yanking away his coat, shirt, string tie, trousers.

"What you doin' to me?" Ham whispered in terror.

"Never mind what I am doing to you," Obed said. "If I want you to know what I am doing to you, I will tell you."

When Ham was naked to his boots, Obed stripped his shirt, tied a gag in Mazwell's mouth, bound his hands, and then used the trousers to secure him with legs drawn against his chest.

Obed looked around and located an ash bin. He lifted

Maxwell and dropped him into the container. Then he tossed the torn clothing in with him. He took up the planter's hat. It was too small, but when he ripped out the hatband, the brim flopped down like a concealing bonnet about his face. He threw the cape around his shoulders and secured it at his throat. Then, pushing the poke of money under his belt band, he walked slowly out of the alley. Once on the street, he glanced both ways, then strode swiftly, going again toward the wharves and levees where the seagoing ships rocked at anchor. . . .

On the docks, he was overcome with fear again. He was afraid to inquire about passage, even though he now had money. The red-inked posters were everywhere down here. He knew that by now Maxwell had been discovered and set free. Soon the streets would be swarming with police.

At an open cart he bought a pan of red beans and rice and ate it ravenously. He bought a dozen steamed oysters and leaned against piles of rice bags eating them. He began to feel better, recovered slightly. His hands no longer trembled so badly.

He watched the seamen hurrying past toward the boats. He was so near, and yet freedom was across an impossible chasm. He was a fugitive black man trying to buy passage on a white man's boat.

"Obed . . . Mansa Obed. . . . Name of God. Is that you?"

Terror flooding through him, Obed jerked his head up, ready to fight, ready to run. He stared into the wide eyes of the young Dutch steward from the *Eagle of the Sea*.

"Steege," Obed whispered. "What are you doing here?"

Steege laughed. "Why shouldn't I be here? I'm on my way to the ship. We're sailing tonight."

Obed straightened. His eyes brimmed with helpless tears. He said, "On the *Eagle of the Sea*?"

Steege nodded, staring at him. "I'm still on her," he said.

"Would the captain sell me passage to Dakar?" Obed said. "I know I look like hell. But I could pay my passage."

Steege nodded. "I know he would. He remembers you as a king. Mansa Obed. In the imperial suite. Come on. We'll go to see him."

"I've got to be careful. I'm being hunted."

Steege smiled. "I thought that was you on those posters. How many seven-foot Mandingans are there?"

"There's one," Obed said. "One that wants to go back home. You might be my last chance."

"We'll make it," Steege said. "If anybody stops us, I'll tell them you work aboard." He shook his head. "My God. I hardly recognized you. Except for the way you stood, with your head up. Regal. I never would have known you. You look like a walking skeleton. What in hell happened to you?"

Obed laughed. "I've been a *nigger* in America," he said, "that's all."

Steege laughed. "Well, it hasn't really agreed with you. Come on, we better get aboard. We sail on the tide."